

SONS O' MEN

G. B. LANCASTER



COLONIAL EDITION

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BY

G. B. LANCASTER

SECOND EDITION

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*Raw labour of a raw-new land,
Rough-hewn along the rougher ways—
And all unskilled am I to stand
And call my wares on either hand,
Or draw to this and this the praise;
And yet—I call—at your command.*

*You, you who make me blessed and cursed,
For that your young days are my youth:
From you I learnt the best and worst
That on your virgin knees was nursed—
That drew from you the utter truth—
And blurred it with a coarser thirst.*

*Raw labour of a raw-new land—
I bring it to the market-place.
The buyers will not understand
The death and life of fiercer brand
That my words miss. But you shall trace
This down the years with stronger hand.*

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SONS O' MEN

THE BACKBONE OF THE COUNTRY.

"But without she bind you to Her,
Without you help subdue Her,
Not yours to love with us our heritage."

BETWEEN Mindoorie and the South Pole lie ten more sheep-and-cattle stations, where a man can take his pleasure and his pain, and break his limbs or his word as he does in softer lands. But Lane's men loved Mindoorie, and they loved him; and they loved best of all, guarding it as a regiment guards its colours, the truth that Mindoorie's savage mountains and scarred flats were won, foot and inch and mile, by pluck paid down.

In the abstract a colonial has no reverence; in the concrete he regards nerve with an approval which comes very near to reverence. This is especially true of South New Zealand, where a man spends his life in the trying to break his neck by saddle and range, and garners great joy from the search.

Mindoorie was South New Zealand — so far south that from the last foothold on Maui's Nose a man can see Erebus, and Terror beyond it. Johnney Murphy swore to this one night in the township, and Clint said, "True for yer," but he knew very well that the thread of mouse-colour sighted seaward one pure morning was cast by the smoke-stack of a passing inter-colonial boat.

"Arrah, little man, phwhat matther?" said Johnney, later; for Clint never indorsed a lie without after qualms. "'Tis not thimselves will ever be top ov th' Nose tu see. Though Oi misregret Oi did not make ut th' Pole utsilf. They cud not have thrown ut in me tathe. Flat-futters, ivery wan!"

Seven-ninths of the Mindoorie men had been born out-back, and bred in the hill-country, and come to understanding of their liabilities by rugged ways such as a strong man loves to tread. There were something over forty of them, all told, men of thews and heart; for Lane had no mercy for loafers—except once. That once belongs to the story of Drake, who fleeced Muggins most completely, and did more evil still. Muggins was down on the Mindoorie books as a fencer; but by all rules of habit and conversation he was branded as lout; and Baby Barnes, of the Ti-tree Hotel, when Muggins went courting her sister, told him, quite truthfully, that nobody loved him. His mouth and limbs were badly hung, and his eyes and nostrils wide-stretched. And he failed Walt Hugon once at an autumn muster; this being the irremediable

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sin for which the Mindoorie boys never gave him absolution.

On the stations time is told, not by months, but by the spring mustering, or "come next shearin'," or "at brandin'-time," or "jest before last lambin'." On Mindoorie an army full twenty strong drew the ranges at the autumn musters, and gave two months filled with aching saddle-work and all discomfort for the good of the country. For Lane's out-station was twelve rough miles from the home-block, and much sheep-country lay beyond that. The skyline of notched mountains made the fencing for this sheep-country, and the going was rocky, and wild with scrub and cabbage-trees, and the tufty snow-grass. Muggins had been under the harrow before; but this year he made daily complaint for his flesh-pots, and for the good white road running past the home wharès, and the township a short five miles down it.

There were some thirty thousand sheep to be brought below the deep-snow line; and it was at close of the fourth hard day, with the boys stiff and raw and weary with the saddle-grip, that the Big Trouble fell, all without warning.

Condy saw it first as he came from the stables, where he had been late with his horse. Just faint smudges of smoky white feathering up along the southernmost ranges under a sky the colour of rotten eggs; but the sight struck colder to Condy than the wind that was like dry ice. For he had left an office stool for love of this life, and each head of stock on the hills was dear to him.

He scudded across the tussock flat to the eating-wharè; burst open the door, and cast the word loose on the boys. Hales and Cortiss squabbled over a card-deal among the dishes on the long table, and the brown of the men round the fire talked in sixes. But Lavel heard, striking a match with a jerk of contempt.

"Snow be blowed!" he said.

"Exactly." Condy raised his voice. "Snow is being blowed—out of the south—at the rate of knots."

"Skittles," said Harry Morel then. But he pushed through the crowd where it turned, and knocked a stool spinning as he jumped for the door.

With the warm fire red on their faces, the boys looked on Condy as he had been some foul beast, and Muggins said argumentatively—

"Can't hev snow berginnin' of March. Not ter lie, yer can't."

"An' that's ahl you know." Johnney Murphy drew hot indignation in the suck of his pipe. "Our hills cud get ut Crismus Day iv they wanted ut; an' ut wud loi as long as yoursilf can—sure no man wud ask ut longer."

"They can do anythin'," murmured Hales, with a card between his teeth.

Hales had said this when Government last raised the Stock-tax. He had said it when Lane showed him a moon-eclipse through the telescope in the garden. He said it for all things beside, and through custom the words had lost weight. They

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did not appease Johnney Murphy, who had looked for fight from his youth up.

"You're a fule," he proclaimed. "Come you here, an' Oi'll prove ut."

But the tide that had surged through the door turned again, bringing a big lean man with it. Instinctively, the careless faces took on one look at his coming, and Condy spoke for them all.

"There's trouble, then. Snow, is it, Walt?"

Walt slipped his poncho, and crossed to the open chimney-place, where the cook boiled himself, and two pots, and three billies.

"Snow 'tis. Hustle on wi' that tea, Jack. We're goin' ter Jollie's Gorge ter-night."

Jollie's Gorge and surrounding hills made the worst muster on Mindoorie. The boys brought nine thousand odd sheep from it annually, and spoilt more horses and dogs in the week they gave there than in all the fifty-one others.

"Blest if I'm goin' at this hour," said Lavel; and even they who disliked him agreed most openly, with secret yearning for the warm fire and their own waiting bunks seven yards away. Walt's command cut the tangle of talk in a stern directness.

"Stop off that row, and git inter yer boots. Nine on yer saddle-up the best hosses yer c'n git holt on—'n yer'll want all yer dogs—'n yer swags. What? D'n't care 'f yer'd a hard day or twenty of 'em. We're goin' ter th' Gorge ter-night."

The boys knew the unbending compulsion which fitted Walt to rule men. They had growled and

obeyed it so often. For if Lane was master at the homestead, Walt Hugon was master on all other corners of Mindoorie, by law of his strength and wisdom. But—according to custom—they made objection before they obeyed.

“Near ready?” Walt’s keen glance roved round the sullen faces in a superb ignoring of reluctance. “Time yer was, then. Not you, Clint; I want yer here. Harry, ’n Hales, ’n Dan, ’n——” The nine detached themselves from their fellows, and went out in haste to the windy red of the evening. For there was no court of appeal from Walt.

“Look slippy wi’ that grub, Jack,” Walt wheeled on the perspiring cook, “or we’ll ha’ter go wi’out it. Clint, yer t’ work the fut-hills till I gits back. Might be a week—might be two. Yer ’ve a nose fur direction ’f yer do git caught in a blizzard. ’N yer mightn’t git no snow. It’s boun’ter be stripy. But bring all yer c’n ter th’ flats.”

Clint stitched on a broken girth at the far table. He was Walt’s mate, and a man of few words.

“Right,” he grunted, without looking up, and it was the cook who asked questions.

“Lane says it’s purposin’ter snow like blazes,” said Walt curtly. “Thermom’ter’s gone down ter th’ bottom ’f the merkery, ’n if it falls through Mindoorie ’ll go lame nex’ year. What? No, I d’know nothin’ ’bout the blamed thing.”

The door slammed behind him, and he ran in long strides to the stables, where the mutter of uneasy wind put speed to the boys’ feet as they

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raced through the paddock beyond. In the two-hundred-acre bulk of it fed the refuse of the station hacks, and Harry Morel rounded them in, bare-backed, on a flighty old mare, with his twenty-foot whip shouting command.

The curate down at the township called Harry a man of sin, and had used him as warning in a sermon which Harry did not go to hear. But neither the curate nor anyone else could better Harry Morel's seat on a horse, or the turn of his whip-wrist as he swung the mob, unbroken, into the yard. There the men descended on them, grimly, and with workmanlike swiftness. For night was near.

All breeds were there to choose from, and all ages. Savage brutes, some, that screamed with laid-back ears, and bit when bucketed into girth and crupper; well-bred stallions, broken too late, and without any manners whatever; nervous young fillies that fled quivering down the wind from the sight of man; stubborn old hacks, sticking in their toes and gripping on the bit when hauled round by the compelling bridle—and a many more that, being over-wise, kicked suddenly, and with effect, on coming under the hand.

But through the roar of wind, and the scatter of curses, and the rattle of stirrup and bit, a half-score were mastered and backed, each after their kind, and loaded with swags, and clattering billies, and loose-balancing sacks of flour and meat.

The intoxication of pace and roaring hooves and wild-eyed snorting horses drove Cortiss into

song when the boys made out from the wharè gates with twenty dogs under their feet.

“Hand the sabres shall swing,”

he shouted, clanking his stirrups where he perched like a little thin monkey, atop of a raking chestnut:

“Hand the 'ead-pieces ring,

W'en the Gallants hof Hengland—the Gallants hof Heng——”

“Keep yer 'ead shut,” howled Muggins; “or sing of ‘'Ard Times’ if yer must sing.”

But there was a certain wild appropriateness in Cortiss' song. It is by such ways as these that the sons of Greater Britain serve the Empire.

Across the downs they headed sheer south for the hills, with the empty rabbiter's hut in the throat of Jollie's Gorge to reach before nightfall. Two-thirds of the sky was unhealthy with the yellow of coming snow, and the cloud-wrack thickened, and darkened, and spread until it overlaid the whole earth very closely. There seemed no more than just room between sky and earth for the little dark figures that scurried into the night by way of flint hills, and naked ground, and pallid clay sidings.

The boys were too weary for talk. They rode, heads down, in the teeth of the wind, and did no more than swear underbreath when Muggins predicted all manner of evils in loud and shaken tones. But Harry Morel swerved near, and the complaint split into yells.

“Harry! Leggo my rein, you silly ass. You'll 'ave me on me head——”

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“Stop that croaking, then. D’you hear? By Jove, Muggins, if you let another chirp out of you——” Muggins stopped like an alarm-clock shut off in mid-action. It was not wise to anger Harry Morel.

The rush of the wind cut their cold faces, and the swift dark blinded their eyes. Walt’s order ran sharply along the forefront.

“Look out! We’re under th’ breakwind. Tony! You young fool! Don’t you go jumpin’ it!”

The breakwind was close-packed manuka-scrub and birch logs. Behind it cowered the ten-by-twelve wharè; and the stake-fence where the horses were loosed hugged all. It was desolate and cold, and it held the stern promise of heavy work.

The horses carried covers beneath the saddles, and, as always, there was cut hay in the lean-to. For Lane was a careful man, and knew the value of foresight.

“Yer git down where yer can, ’n sleep,” said Walt. “F’r I’m goin’ ter hev yer up agin when the moon’s showin’.”

So they lay on the earth floor, and slept in bone-weariness, to be waked with the old cry of the cattle-camps, and driven out into a far bleak night where the moonlight was broken by sodden clouds, and the hooves beat appallingly loud with the low sky as sounding-board.

“An’ ut’s dayloight he cahls ut,” said Johnney Murphy, chewing on his old briar. “An ondacint attimpt at gasloight wid the poipes impty—that’s phwhat Oi cahls ut.”

"Hi-yah," yawned Condy, falling into line. "You may call it what you darn well please, but it's going to be a snorter. Trust Walt for that."

"Divide here," called Walt, his keen face white through the shades; and then he told off their duties.

For nineteen long hours they laboured: under the moon; through the bleak dark before dawn; into the day that waited, faint and raw, for evening to cast itself over the earth in a sudden temper of railing wind and scudding snowdrift.

From bushy highlands they drew the sheep, from far slippery pinnacles, and up out of stony water-courses and gullies clogged with tangled undergrowth. And the bleating and the bark of tired dogs filled all the dull, shadowless day that lay like a blight on body and soul. Breasting the swirl of rain and sleet; struggling and stumbling on crumbling rock or through swamps; wary, alert, and working each man up to the collar, they won to the night. And all the day long Walt held the reins, and drove the full team with whip and spur.

Someone discovered Tony Lascelles exhausted to tears on top of a barren spur where gathered the great grey fungus that is so mercilessly like a resting sheep, and Sheehan was mad with a toothache caught in an ice-cold funnel between two bare hills. But Sheehan, though unpleasant company, asked nor received clemency. Clint had said once, taking pride in his mate, that "a chap'd hev to be most awful dead 'fore Walt'd excuse him

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when snow was out on sheep-country." And all Mindoorie had agreed with one voice.

They lay in the wharè that night, stiff, and spent beyond desire for speech. And it was Muggins alone who growled through the smoke that reeked of drying clothes—

"Blest ef it ain't goin' ter be worse ter-morrer. Hear to the blanky hold wind. I wishes I was 'ome."

Walt knocked the fresh-fallen snow from his leggings, and his thick brows met over his long nose. The snow-grass flats and round downs of tussock had taken four thousand sheep that day. But the real work was to come; and no human flesh has a right to shrink in time of stress.

"Yes," he said, in direct challenge. "It'll be wuss ter-morrer, 'n wuss'n that day after, 'n wuss still day after that. 'N you'll go through wi't. Got anythin' more ter say?"

Muggins' brain was elemental. Besides, he feared Walt.

"No," he said hastily, and fell asleep with his head on a flour-bag.

Walt sat down heavily.

"It'll drift like the mischief," he said. "'N we'll be short-handed now, fur some on yer mus' kip these brutes down."

"Don't give Muggins that job," prayed Cortiss, heaping manuka on the fire.

"I won't. Lazy hound! He's got ter graft. 'N it will be graft. Four thousand ewes on this beat, 'n we've on'y raked in seven hundred."

"There's that ball in the township to-night," said Hales inconsequently. "They're boun' to go down from the out-station. I was goin'."

Someone sighed from a corner.

"It's a gay kind o' ball we're havin'," he said.

And then sleep came where they lay, curled in knots, or stretched flat, or—as Walt and young Tony Lascelles—with their backs to the log wall where the wind whistled, and dead pipes between their teeth.

The back-country is a stern mother to the sons that she has borne. Time by time will she strain them, and burden them, and test them, until each separate spirit stands up, confessed in strength, or goes under, passing out from her power. But those that are true men love her for the want of ease she gives them.

The earth was streaked barley-sugar at day-break, and white powder spun down from a windy sky. Walt went out, his oilskins flapping like stern-sheets, and looked long at the hills close above.

"It'll be the very devil up there," he said. "'N so we'll take it fust. Git a move on."

Cortiss seduced the whole ten into furious snow-balling across the low hills. Then Walt took charge, chasing them up the steep cliffs, where they girded their loins and spent themselves generously.

The snow paid no attention to rule or to anything else. Already it blew into drifts round bluff corners, and the dance of it curtained the standing rocks until heads drove against them unseeing.

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Cortiss fell under lee of a boulder; rolled in fierce pain; consoled himself for a wrenched knee-joint with song. Hales and Franklin came to the shout of "Ho, boys, carry me 'ome," and Cortiss, his peaky face twisted and set, hurled invective at them.

"Git back to your work, you lazy, limpin' loafers. Hi won't listen to no hexcuses. Think Hi can't carry meself 'ome w'en Hi'm ready?"

They left him, and flung themselves to the labour again. For the danger grew with the hours. The sheep were harried and driven with dogs. They were tempted, step by step, down the open ways, by green boughs drawn before and incessant shouting behind. They were led along tracks scooped out by the shovel, and hunted through loose bush-patches. And overhead, underfoot, into each smallest crevice, the snow sped where the wind took it. And the wind blew seven ways in one short hour.

Muggins fell foul of Walt what time all eye-balls ached with the strain, and all limbs were drunken through weariness.

"I've 'ad suff o' this," he said. "We've grafted ten hours, an' I'm done. I'm goin' back to the wharè."

"So'm I." Lavel clipped a shovel under his armpit, and tenderly licked a blister on his flayed palm. "It'll take me a week ter get over this now."

Walt barred the way, big and angry.

"I'm on'y askin' o' yer what yer've got," he

said. "Don't expect no pluck er brains. But I'll take the length o' yer feet f'r's long's I want 'em. 'N if yer objec' we'll settle it now."

Condy swung down a broom-rooted perpendicular with his pet collie-pup on his shoulders.

"You'll need a whip to those two 'fore all's done," he remarked pleasantly, dropping beside them.

"If I need it I'll use it," said Walt, very quietly, and left them to chew on the thought.

And yet the snow fell. It was dry and unstable as coarse salt, and the boys ploughed to the hip through the hollows. It was wet and clinging, and the soakage passed oilskins and all beneath, to chill and make brittle the bones. Boots were no more worth than waste paper, and the men worked doggedly, sulkily, counting the cost of bodily pains to come.

Hour by hour little colonies off-shot from the main mobs were sapped out of drifts ten, twelve, fifteen feet below daylight, and dragged singly to the first snow-grass root where it waved slim red spines above the white. Hour by hour they shovelled, and beat down the lighter snow, and walked until all the world was a treadmill, and the bleating of sheep dulled on the stretched ears.

On the fifth day Walt climbed to a hog-back swept clear by the wind, and looked down on the shapeless gullies where white eddies ran piling. Right below, to the left, the rescued from a hundred hills moved through the broken snow round the spring of the tussock and niggerhead

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tufts. But back where the great wind howled in the ranges were some three thousand yet.

"Guess we'll move no more," he said; and thereafter began the packing of snow-grass and bush-fodder through the cruel days.

The snow was sticky, and clung to hair and beard. And clung to the wool, parting it sheer to the skin, that the yolk might be ruined beyond repair. Many new-come-at mobs, having browsed their bodies into staring tufts, stood up on a first floor of weaklings and cried passionately for food.

"And half of them 'll die when the green stuff comes," said Condy. "They're not worth the fag." But he slaved for them all the same.

Then the storm broke into dazzling sunshine; the wind departed in slinking haste, while the wide white world turned up a sparkling face to the unspoked sky, giving to one and another snow-blindness without delay. Lavel lost all sight in two hours, and sat wailing in the wharè. Alone; for Cortiss, wood-legged in a totara-splint, rode daily along the lines, that the mobs on the flat might not drive before the wind. The boys' clothes smoked to dryness on them as they toiled with the pack-horses; keeping the track over narrow saddles distorted by drifts into deceitful and unstable shapes; watching always for the tonnage of snow that the hill-brows sweated without due warning, and forgetting to curse, to complain, to do aught but serve the many-headed thing that cried to them from all sections of the universe. And

the wage that each wrought for was one pound a week, and the right to be classed as a man.

Then Walt, prospecting by strange ways alone, fell on a mob of eight hundred head, where the rocks that swelled as the ribs of a ship had turned the snow. He beat back in the boundless joy of a child; seized on the first man that showed on the hills, and swept him, pack-horse in hand, up uncounted spurs and across thread-like saddles, that he too might give thanks. The man was Muggins, and he did not give thanks; nor yet what his heart longed to give. For the loathing of this work was fast in his bones, and fear of Walt curbed his tongue.

"Ewes," crowed Walt, "'n nigh eight hund'ed still livin'. Wi' the dogs 'n shovellin' 'n trampin' wi' the hosses I sh'd reckon we cud git 'em up ter the bush."

The bush of loose scrub and big timber lay up the hill three hundred yards. The sheep were sore-mouthed and mangy, and tottered one on the other in attempt to walk. Muggins took spirit to slouch back to his horse.

"Damned ef I will, then. I done my share o' graft a'ready. It'll be dark now 'fore I git ter the wharè with all your foolin'."

"Yer not goin' back ter th' wharè," said Walt curtly. "We c'n sleep in the rocks, 'n do wi'out grub f'r a night. Take yer shovel 'n git down t' it."

"I won't," shouted Muggins, and cast defiance that made Walt shed his tattered old coat in one wriggle.

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"So long's yer on Mindoorie yer 'll work f'r her," he said. "D'yer want me ter teach yer how?"

"I was only jokin'," said Muggins, breathing like a winded horse. And Walt, putting his full shoulder-weight into the shovel-swing, never guessed how nearly he was cut down from behind at any time through the next five hours.

The snow reeled and dazzled under scarlet sunset, and the two shovelled until they fell where they lay. Then they rose, dragging feebly across to the cliff shelter. Muggins slept log-like; but his powers of endurance were done when Walt roused him.

"I ain't goin' on," he declared; "an' me empty and dog-tired and with bleedin' 'ands. Leave me be, you brute."

Walt's face and voice were new, and suggested a man in desperate straits.

"Come out," he said. "Ef I hev ter make yer, more 'n yer hands 'll bleed."

But Muggins escaped, and fled to his horse, casting himself across the packs. Savagely he flogged it up to the hill-crest, marvelling that Walt did not follow, and found his way back to food and fire in late evening. Here fear beset him, and in answer to all questions concerning Walt he said always that he did not know.

The boys had been hard-pressed, each on his own unaided beat, and another windy horror was girding itself to southward. But for Walt's sake they put Muggins under pressure, and took the track at earliest dawn, with the sinner, wrathful and alarmed, riding between a stern and watchful guard.

Clouded snow scudded across the hills, with a mad wind behind it; and midday was past before they looked from the height on the huddled sheep and the half-made track where a man shovelled on zig-zag lines such as are used for a hat-rack.

"What in the name o' all things is he doin'?" asked Hales.

Condy knew, and plunged down headlong. The hooves made no sound in the snow, and the man never straightened until Condy touched him. Then he sat promptly.

"My land!" he said; "I'm fair starved. Ha' ye got anythin' t' eat?"

"How long have you been blind?" demanded Condy.

Walt grunted; his teeth clenched in a damper.

"Since yest'd'y morn'n'. Think I'd a-let that Muggins go if I'd a peep in me? Bust on wi' that track 'n git th' ship moved. I done what I could, 'f 'tain't plumb straight. An' leave Muggins ter me. I've suthin' ter teach him when I got sight agin."

But Muggins was taught twenty-eight times first.

MATES.

“Hi! Ring 'em in across the tussock ;
Swing 'em where the gates are set an' wide—
But the clackin' hooves are thunder,
An' you're done if yer git under,
Steady! where the gates are yawnin' wide!”
What used to be.

“NOW—confound it all,” said Walt, and knew that his language was mild. For the savage low warning of a scrub bull came from somewhere back in the manuka-blocked night, and by all laws of sense and convenience the sound should have risen a full mile nearer, and infinitely more amidships.

Walt twisted in the saddle.

“Rouse 'em up.” He spoke to the unseen trail behind, but there was not need. The horses knew before the answer rolled back from the distance. They bunched on the moment, fighting the easy bit, and snorted, with nostrils blown out and flanks quivering. Condy pulled clear with an oath and a barked shin, and then thirteen voices explained to Lavel the sin that lay with him because he had not followed on swiftly.

The boys were sore from a week of cruel saddle-work on the scarps by West o' the Law, and stiff from the last hour's stooping ride, where close

scrub tore the shirt and slapped across face and neck. But their senses woke with a tracker's lust at the call, and exhaustion dropped from them.

Lavel was riding second this night because Harry Morel and five more held the coaches beyond the low hill to southward, and it is only picked men who come to the lead at such times. For excitement and heavy danger, and the unlawful pride which makes a man one with the electric powerful bulk between his knees, are like to unbalance they who do not possess the cool instant understanding that a stockman pays down daily for his right to live. There were none on the trail tonight who would lose that understanding unless it might be Lavel. His stirrup was locked with Clint's, and yet he did not swear.

Muggins was calling him "ratty," and soothing his young 'un as it shook and sweated under the hand; and three hideous stifled minutes went by before the knot unravelled, and swung hard round to the left.

Lavel cocked his ears, and lay forward to the neck of his three-cornered sorrel, whereon hung half the jokes of the camp. But the track ahead was dumb, and blind in the smothering warm dark. The challenge belled again, and once more and below was the muffled thunder of uneasy hooves.

Then Lavel—because a man is allowed to make his own mistakes, and his own glory—took up the power that had come to him, and pushed into the unknown, with none to lead.

But he did not tell the boys. Their knowledge

would come in the open, where there was room for evasion.

It was all tingling, silent life in the narrow track where the hunt went forward like a swift writhing snake, and with very little more sound. Under the light, swaying hand that guided, the horses trod cat-soft and cunning. Came the occasional snap of a branch, or a low word when a manuka-plume whipped back from the shoulder before ; but horse and man ran silent, with every nerve tense and yearning for the fierce work that would assuredly come.

Franklin was behind Lavel, and Lavel used the spur that they might not make contact. For there had been unpleasantness between them at the mid-day camp, when Lavel had found occasion to call Franklin a "turnip-headed liar." Franklin's further speech had not been blameless, and now, at this ten of the clock, neither man was fit for the company of his fellows. For the two were mates, as men mate only in a life where is not woman nor child, and the side that craves love cleaves, kind to kind, with none to come between. And when mates quarrel the whole camp attempts to put the matter right, and earnestly and tactlessly destroys reconciliation.

Lavel was dripping in the grey dusty scrub, though a frost lay over the earth outside. He looped his whip, and trailed it again ; he considered the chance of picking these scrubbers out of the gullies that flanked the horizon-hills in a week's time ; and he considered the talk of the boys when

they came to the plain and saw this chance. For, beside Walt and Harry Morel, there was no man on Mindoorie could wheel a mob of scrubbers with perfect security when the attack must be made from the wrong side.

There was half the compass to be fetched round this hidden trouble to the off-side before worse should happen, and there was nothing to guide but the uneven bellowing that made echoes in the bushes.

Then came a roar that overrode all echo, and with a crash the mob broke.

Lavel's spurs went home with a sudden breathless shock, for it was his now to collar the lead.

To his right hand, at no locatable distance whatever, and with all the pounding stir of a threshing-mill, raced the clacking hooves. Vicious manuka tore and battered him; the grunt of broken-winded pikers came clear above the sharp crackle of undergrowth where the boys rode, grim-lipped and silent.

Light shivered ahead; the scrub reeled back, and the downs lay white under the frosty moon. Half a mile to port the scrubbers were clear of the manuka, and heading savagely for the other side of the world.

"Two hundred, if there's a head," roared Condy, and charged out at Lavel's side. "Collar them! For any sake, collar them!"

And then followed that which Lavel had feared. For all men shouted that Walt should make the curve, and each lost moment was rousing them to the wrath of murder.

“Walt’s dropped out. Close up.” He swung out his whip, and made the pace with the knowledge that the eyes of all men were on him.

To wheel a stampeding mob needs a rather nicer sense of calculation than to play the game of bowls. For the results are not quite the same. Too wide a curve brings the point on the hip of the avalanche, and then it is wise to stand aside. And if the curve be too narrow, there is chance of crossing the forefront at an angle that gives the outsiders no room to turn. And then death allows no longer the chance to stand aside.

All bodies of men, from an orchestra to a brigade, acknowledge a leader by custom, and for this reason the boys stormed after Lavel across the rough ground that bristled with dried water-courses, and rabbit-holes, and little stone out-crops that crackled and gave up their lives in fire-sparks to the beating hooves. The earth sobbed and ripped under the iron; and the trail of what was no more man and beast but one wild, resistless personality, flicked round, a drawn black string, with the tip curving to loop in the mass that ran into the westing.

For the boys were riding as only they do ride who have crossed the saddle or ever their childish petticoats were forked; and beneath them the mighty hearts throbbed and shook, sending up the unexplainable thrill that casts out all fear, and leaves only the mad exultation of the hunter.

Lavel sat loose and light, with a keen eye on the inner wing where Franklin rode. He was playing for the gallery, and this—not being a

nice thing for a man to do at any time—becomes absolutely sinful when he holds the guidance of other men in his hand.

Franklin saw it with the understanding which knew Lavel in every mood, and the Scotch grain in him toughened as he shortened his off rein.

“Dommed if that bletherin’ fule ’ull lead me,” he said, and pulled into the wind that the rump of his old white horse might indicate that he rode to his own beat entirely.

The boys wavered a moment, and so waked the devil in Lavel. He bound them to him with flaying words, so that later, among the little sand-hills, they drew foot by foot to the mob, and the stockwhips sang out a greeting.

Round the lead they came, with Lavel swelling in the forefront; swung the roaring tangle of pikers, steers, and fierce old scrub bulls by the steady volley of shouting whips, and tore down wind, where it was each man for the multitude with the wisdom God gave him.

Here overtook them a black wrathful shadow, calling them by selected names, and wanting to know why they had missed its lead, and necessitated a turn of the trail to find them; why they had not wheeled the rush a mile back; why they had made such bloomin’ asses of themselves. By cunning, the boys pitchforked Lavel under the harrow, and left him, as was certainly most wise. For Walt’s displeasure was not a little thing.

The moonlight shone clear as sunlight, and it

was infinitely more painstaking. Every flint ridge and tussock hollow, every dried creek and stately cabbage-tree stood out, in finest detail; and Clint, dropping his whip across the billowing backs, marvelled at the distinct outline of the Mindoorie triangle on a heaving yellow flank.

Then came a screech that was not the cry of a night-bird, because only a creature with a soul could conceive such terror as it held. The boys who rode on the near wing caught Lavel where he pulled his frantic horse all ways, and their eyes followed his shaking hand. Then they took breath sharply, and beat their own mounts over the head in useless haste. For the mob swept southward in a half-mile line, and Franklin galloped with a long shivering shadow behind him where the bed of the torrent must pass. As they looked, it passed, dripping blood from the nostrils, and foam from the loose flapping lips. And there was no more that squat figure with the long black tail out on the tussock, but only a two-hundred-head mob of stampeding cattle.

"We can't help," said Walt, as Lavel cried, and sawed the sorrel about, and swore that he would split the mob if death took payment body and soul. "Yer can't split that mob now no more'n yer c'd split a iron-wood wi' yer thumb-nail. 'N if yer did, million ter one yer'd strike the wrong place an' bunch 'em. Franklin's the right way round, or—or we'd a seed somethin' of him by now. Follow up an' holt 'em—there ain't nothin' more we can do,"

The boys had faced death uncounted times, and without fear; as is the custom of the men who make out to the corners of the earth where is life in the raw, strong and unbridled. Muggins was not the only one there who had seen a stockman tossed and ripped and trampled into eternity, and Walt carried a scar in his heart that woke anew at every cattle-stampede. But this death that waited on Franklin out where the lines of horns rippled like the white lip of an incoming sea was not the quick, fierce ending that a man faces with his fellows.

The boys thought of the shouldering in of the great bodies; of branching sharp horns; of the stumbling feet of the old white horse; and a deadly sickness cramped them, and dried their mouths. It was a ghastly, wordless horror to gallop through the still uncaring night in the wake of that great bulk, which would presently cast out to them a Thing, as a sausage-machine casts out meat.

Over knife-laid ridges; through a patch of rustling bracken; down into a stony creek where the brutes branched at a scarp, and joined on the tussock above; across a shallow flax-swamp crackling with young ice, and a dried raupo bed that rattled like a Venetian blind in the wind; over flint anew, and tough tripping broom-root, until bush showed big and close in the livid night, and the impatient moaning of the coachers came intermittently from foot of the hill-siding. And still the mob held Franklin and the old white horse, but whether in life or in unspeakable death, no man dared say.

Lavel rode like a drunken man, and Condy had eyes on his bridle-rein. For Lavel was crying helplessly, as a child cries, and praying to the ten Heavens of the Maori creed that he might yet be allowed to make it up with Franklin. The boys watched sharply for that which Lavel must not see if it lay out in the cold night-glare, and no speech whatever cut the heavy silence that hung above the beating of hooves and the creaking of leather.

They came to the siding where shingle chattered down the shaking earth, and slid into the black gully below. But Harry sat at the siding-lip that yawned to the bush-rimmed hollow, and told his men that all the world was mad, because there was no storm of whips behind the dust-cloud that clacked downhill and bellowed.

“Stand ready along to ring ‘em,” he said. “Keep your eyes skinned with the coachers, Shannon. An’ Heaven send they don’t run slap through us.”

He jumped for his horse, and wheeled out with the quick firm touch of knee and hand that steadied and thrilled and gave cunning to the Swanshot colt. Red eyes and red wide nostrils peered from the dust, retreated and came again by order of the pressure behind. Then out poured the mob in a wild spreading flood; the gathering threat of the whips rolled round, and they that had waited through the long, listening hours, fell to their work, keen and unthinking of all under the sky but the stern necessity to beat these mad things in among the quiet coachers.

To the lay eye they were flying demons with endless tails that curved and bit and shouted in this dark tussock-place of shadows; and the hearts of scrub-bull and ancient piker melted alike to water as they ran for succour to the lowing coachers.

It was then that Lavel charged on the challenging whips, and cried—

“Franklin! Where are you, Franklin? For God’s sake—Franklin!”

“Go to blazes!” said Harry, very entirely wroth, and snatching at Lavel’s rein. “You’re messing up the whole thing. Walt—oh, good enough! Pass ’em up there—quick.”

Commodore did it, for Walt’s eyes were sifting through the loosened mob, with an eagerness that became dazed wonder before it was wheeled corner by corner, and steadied, and held.

The boys who had come through the miles of horror that they would not forget, slid from their saddles and whispered together; and the residue learnt the matter piecemeal, and shuddered. For Harry put words to their thought.

“Must have gone over the siding, of course. The lighter weight would naturally work to the edge. Well, he won’t come alive out of that, anyhow.”

“We might look for him for a week,” said Muggins. “It’s all deep holes an’ bush an’ rocks an’ things. I—I’d sooner we’d found him up there.”

In New Zealand, Nature does not dispose of her

dead by the work of dingos or crows or ants. It lies where life left it, and waits. And this is infinitely the more hideous ending of the two.

The boys drew apart, and looked on Lavel with a vague reverence. For he was the dead man's chosen mate, and they had parted with evil words. Lavel seemed to feel that they were looking. He rose up from the log where he had sat with his head in his hands, and climbed stiffly to the saddle again.

"I'm goin' inter the gully," he said slowly, and his face was awful in the white light. "I'm goin' ter look for Franklin. I'm goin' ter look till I finds him."

"Stop him," said Harry, coming back from a sharp scrutiny of the pickets. "He's not fit to be on a horse in the state he's in. Don't be a fool, Lavel. There's no sense looking for anything in this light."

But it was not Harry's voice that struck Lavel to stillness. Out of the ink-blacks of the siding-foot a man and horse moved, grey and silent where the shadows crowded; and the face with streaks of earth on it was Franklin's.

It was there without sound or movement on the soft grass, and the boys grew cold through all their quick-flowing blood. For this thing was not of earth. Walt gripped Lavel's arm.

"Speak ter it," he muttered. "If it's his ghost—speak ter it, Lavel."

Lavel's lips were dry to cracking, and the horror of his face frightened the boys to the core. Then—because Franklin had been very dear to him

in the flesh—Lavel's soul was strengthened, and he rode at the grey thing in the shadows, crying hoarsely, "Franklin—old mate——"

"Hae ye got a wee drappie whushkey about ye, Lavel mon?" said the grey thing. "Losh! A'm fair played out!"

Because the human mind does not react with the swiftness of stretched elastic, there was one minute of blank silence. Then the boys laughed until they rolled weakly in the saddles, and their eyes were blinded.

For—following explanation—Lavel went afar off, and swore at Franklin for that he had saved his craven life at the undercut bluff when it parted the mob away back in the dry creek, and had so burked all the work that came after.

"Near killed, was yer?" he sneered. "Pity yer didn't do the thing properly while yer was after it. Me callin' yer? I was callin' yer a blessed big ijit, if yer wants ter know what I was callin' yer. Stop off yer chiackin', you fellers, can't yer?"

But the boys continued to giggle in elemental joy. For, without doubt, it was Lavel who had been the blessed big idiot.

SAND OF THE DESERT.

IN the beginning, Frank Drake's people sent him to New Zealand to reform. Any colonial knows the worth of that step. It is giving a child a knife that he may not continue to cry for it. Drake went to reform primarily on Mindoorie Station, Southland, and because his whole moral being was rotten at core, he did not succeed with any brilliancy.

Lane bore with him for two years—this for the sake of old times overseas—but he said "Thank the Lord" very gratefully when Drake disappeared in drunken wrath, leaving his debts unpaid. Lane settled the debts, upheld by the consolation that Drake was not his son,—as might have been if the world had not once gone awry,—and so forgot him for twenty-four months.

It was then, through the blaze of a midsummer blue day, that Drake came back, utterly ragged and footsore. Clearly, he had been in deeper places than all Lane's years had known; and when he asked for help—trading still on those old times overseas—Lane sent him up to the out-station with the prayer that the wide clean life of the hills might patch his sodden body and soul. He told

Walt to work the man so far as his broken strength would allow, and rode over the hills and the straight roads six weeks later to see the working of the cure.

"He's mighty slick at the understandin' o' things," said Walt,—he was driving lambs up the paddock when Lane fell in with him,—“but he won't put his back inter anythin', sir. Seems he ain't got no grip left. Bin goin' it pretty well, I reckon.”

Lane knew the fatal adaptability that gave Drake understanding of more than a man should know.

“Yes. Shouldn't wonder. But he never had any grip. He's no use, then?”

“Well, he jest goes anyhow, like sand in a blow; shiftin', shiftin'. Yer can't drive in any peg't'll hold.”

“Yes, yes.” Lane tugged his grey beard despondently. “Sand of the desert. He was that always. I hoped life might have solidified him a bit. Well—what work have you put him at, Walt?”

“All sorts. Larst, I put him ter ploughin' the Ridge paddick. Hev ter holt the handles fur all yer worth there, yer know, 'case she kicks at a rock. Reckoned p'r'aps that 'd git some grip inter him. 'N he broke three shares, 'n then she landed him under the jaw, 'n he come back 'n cursed my head off.”

“The young—well?”

“I guv him one under t'other jaw,” said Walt

composedly; but his lean body was taut as a singing whip-lash.

Lane sat his saddle heavily, and his keen eyes were clouded.

"If I lose sight of him again, Walt, he'll go under."

Walt grunted complete assent.

"Then, I think you'll have to put up with him a bit longer. I can't have him at the homestead—too near the township."

"All right, sir; if yer says so." Walt whistled his dog on to a breaking lamb, and added awkwardly, "He's bleedin' the boys pretty free at 'two-up' 'n them sort."

Lane exploded.

"Great Scot, man! d'you think I keep a nursery, that you want me to coddle my hands that way? Pooh! If they lose money to Drake it's their own lookout."

"They ain't complainin' 'bout it." Walt was grinning. "But he's goin' a bit too far. 'Got a lien over Muggins sure 'nuff, 'n it's messin' him up proper."

The man who has charge of other men must needs pay for it on the nail. This constitutes the divinest privilege of power. Lane combed the reins through his fingers absently. Then he straightened with a sigh of deep trouble.

"Send Drake down this afternoon, then. No, I won't see him now. But I suppose I've no right to let him play up with more than his own life if I can help it."

Lane tried to explain something of this to Drake that night in the Mindoorie library, and Drake stood on the hearthrug and cringed.

"Oh, I say, don't be so confoundedly rough on a fellow, Lane. I—I'm not so bad as all that, and one must do something. Muggins is only a rotter, anyway. What does it matter?"

Lane looked at the bags under the blue eyes, and at the twitching of the loose lips that had lost their fine lines; and almost he laughed to remember the futility of his appeal.

"You can damn your own soul if you will—you've done it pretty considerably already. But I won't have you playing the mischief with my men. I'll keep you here so long as you behave, but the next time I catch you at this game I'll kick you out; on my soul, I will."

"I don't want your confounded charity," said Drake sulkily. "I'm sick of this brutal country, anyhow. I'd sooner go home. Look here, Lane; you stump up the needful and I will go home. Go on; you might as well. It 'd only be a flea-bite to you—and you wouldn't have me corruptin' your innocent little station hands any more."

"No, by ——," said Lane, behind his teeth. "I'll keep that disgrace from them, if I can. You'll never go home on my money—and no one else would be fool enough to back you."

"It might save me," whined Drake. "You told me I needed savin'; and there's nobody here cares. The old mater wouldn't chuck me out, Lane. I want to go home to her."

It was the plaint of a child, and it hurt Lane's very heart.

"You know best what you've done with yourself since you left me. You are not fit to go back to her; I know that much, and I'm not going to send you." He laid down his half-filled pipe, for his hands shook. "Man, have you got no pride left in you? What would they think of you at home now?"

"Oh yes! Nice sneakin' way to get out of it, that! Easy enough to go raggin' a man when you won't plunk down a penny to save him. You're a ——"

"That'll do," said Lane sternly; and the weaker soul gave to the power that sat in the keen eyes. "I haven't the slightest desire to save you. Your life is not only of no earthly use to anyone, but it is a damned sight of harm. Now, clear out. And remember; I keep you here just so long as you behave yourself decently."

But after five days Drake asked no more forbearance of Lane. His "lien" over Muggins included the transference of the seventy odd which Muggins had laid by with a view to "a little bit o' land"; and with it Drake fled to Dunedin, in the avowed intention of taking passage by the direct home boat, *Rimutaka*.

Lane chased him coastward, and laid information assiduously. To tell Drake's mother face to face that her boy was dead would be infinitely an easier thing than to let him go back to her.

But Drake had boarded no known boat, and neither did the police discover him.

This was left for Lane three months later, when he came to town for the winter show, and looked out of his hotel window in the night-time.

A Salvation Army meeting went forward on the curb below, and Drake was hatless and fervent in the midst of it, giving his testimony.

Lane did not listen—although it would assuredly have been worth the hearing if Drake spoke with any truth. He drew back, and chuckled a little.

“Stony-broke, of course, and rescued. Well, that settles it. Wonder what gutter they picked him out of.”

Then he shivered, knowing that Drake would certainly go back to the gutter very presently.

For—like sand of the desert—he ever slid through the hands that would lift him.

WITHOUT PROOF.

“Who knows what thing may creep abroad
Upon the night's spent tide?
Is the Earth racked with penance done
For that I sinned who am her son—
Was it the wind that sighed?
Or a Thing of the Night that I may not see,
With soft steps following after me?”

The Two Faces.

THERE were five men in the sod wharè that was rather close quarters for one—when is added a bunk, a table, several cooking-pots and dishes, a corrugated iron bulge in a corner that Tommy Derolles called his larder, and a pouring volley of smoke from the green wood fire in the open chimney-place.

Without, the jumbled mountains and flats lay under snow that turned grey in the dull light except where it was tramped before the wharè into greasy mud. Split brown peaks rose up here and there through the distances of universal colourlessness, and at foot of the naked undercut hill shadowing the squat hut four horses stamped and shivered as the wind lifted the sacks on their quarters.

A little whirl-devil of powdery snow came over

the scarp of the hill, and flung itself viciously into the gaping chimney-mouth. Then Tommy Derolles—he had been trying to hang a billy somewhere in the smoke—sat back on his heels to swear.

Clint drove his hands in his pockets, and whistled meaningly through shut teeth. By nature and upbringing Tommy was a sufficiently pleasant and gentlemanly youngster, but in this half-hour he had brought himself perilously near punishment more than once. When Walt slid from his frozen saddle at the door, and demanded tea and a good fire for the comforting of these four who had returned from bitter droving on the coast, Tommy had rolled out of his bunk to revile them all, and to declare savagely that there was not a dry stick within a hundred miles.

He had attempted to fight Condy for taking two of the larder shelves for firewood, and had forthwith cast on green logs that sizzled with snow. It was after this that he shamelessly insulted Muggins because the smoke made him cough. Muggins coughed after a manner of his own, and Tommy objected to the hiccough at the end of it. He also fathered lies without form or end on Clint and Condy, and had generally made himself so offensive that Walt used all his strength on Clint that he should not take Tommy out in the snow and kill him.

The wharè was Tommy's home at this present. It made the south-west boundary-corner of Min-doorie, and there lived no other man within twelve miles of it. Here Tommy fed phosphorus to the rabbits day by day, and brought in the skins

when he came fortnightly to the out-station for provisions. He had endured for three months, and that is a short spell of outpost duty as things go in the back-country; but the effect upon him was very evil.

"That tea ready yet?" growled Condy.

Tommy appeared from where the smoke was thickest, and flung down the billy.

"No. And it isn't going to be, either. How the deuce d'you expect me to get a fire out of this rotten stuff? I haven't had anything hot for two days myself—an' I'm blest if I'm going to bust for you. Go an' grub dry sticks out of the snow your beastly selves——"

"Oh, let it up." Muggins was growing savage. "I've 'ad suff o' you, Tommy. I'm goin' 'ome. Air ye ready, you chaps? If you ain't fed up of 'im, I am."

He hauled his oilskins from under the table, and began to get into them noisily, and Condy rubbed the steamy breath off the little pane of glass to peer at the horses nosing their empty bags over the snow.

"Right you are," he said; and then Tommy plunged at him.

"Oh, I say, you fellows, please don't go yet. Please. I—I won't swear at you again. I—I wish I hadn't been such a beast. I—perhaps it's the stillness up here makes me feel so queer, you know. Look here, I'll have another go at that fire—an' you can fix up a damper if you like, Clint. I'll have enough flour to last me out."

"Not in that green muck, thanks." Clint cocked his eye to the lead sagging heavens, and foretold more snow. "Guess we'd better leg it first. Can't make over the saddle in drift. We'll git tea at home, anyways. Look slippy, you beggars."

"Don't go. Oh, you needn't go yet," cried Tommy; and there was a ring in his voice that was piteous, and not at all understandable to these men, bred and trained to loneliness and self-strength.

Condy halted with his poncho half on to look at him. It was because Tommy was so little and young, and so painfully English, that Clint's desire to flay him into righteousness had been discouraged. But not before had Tommy so mixed prayer and insult as he had done this day, and not before had his eyes shown a something which should not be in the eyes of any man—unless he has sinned to the deserving of it.

Condy was blankly puzzled. But Walt had seen solitude work to the heart of a man before this, and he knew the signs of it.

"Don't like leavin' the little chap alone, somehow." This was to Condy's address. "What he want 's a mate."

"What he wants is a jolly good licking," said Condy, dragging down the flaps of his cap. "And someone will be giving it to him before long. He's got the cheek of old Nick. Why in thunder didn't you let Clint walk into him, Walt?"

"Couldn't. 'Tain't all his fault. Nob'dy 'ud

make anythin' but smoke out'n them logs. 'N if he's bin livin' on cold tack fur a couple o' days, there's small blame ter him fur bein' on his hind-legs. 'Sides—suthin' sgot grip on him that hadn't ought. Did yer twig his eyes, Condy? Yer 've seed it before when a feller's all on his own. 'Member Jule Fratchett?"

"Rats!" But Condy was uneasy. "It was drink with Jule. This kid doesn't——"

"No more'd Jule at first. His nerves went same's Tommy's. If I cu'd leave one on yer 'nstead——"

He reflected rapidly. Condy could not bear up this end of work that had proven too hard for Tommy, for Condy had come off such a post on West o' the Law side that he might help with the draught of cattle that had been left on the coast, and he must go back to his wharè in the morning. Muggins could not. They were fence-making down at the homestead, and there was no man in the district could line up standards in the same day with Muggins. Clint could not, because he would assuredly poison himself with the phosphorus, and need burial.

Walt bit on his pipe, and grunted; and Tommy's white face showed round the fatness of Muggins.

"I do wish you'd stay a bit longer, Walt. It's so blessed lonely here. I haven't had a soul to speak to for ten days——"

"You're so awful sweet to them when they do come," said Clint nastily, and the white face flamed on the instant.

"It's your own silly fault, curse you. You're always chiacking a fellow——"

"Stop it off, Tommy." Walt's heavy hand dropped on the boy's shoulder. "'N you chaps git up 'n git fast 's yer can. I'll be home ter-morrer."

"Don't be talkin' tommy-rot," said Clint. "There'll be drifts in Macklin's Gully to-morrow. Tommy'll hev to lump it up here till the snow hardens, but we can't spare you, Walt."

"I'll be home ter-morrer." Tommy's shoulder twitched under Walt's hand. "Is any fodder fur my moke in the shed?"

"Y—yes. Franklin left some when he was up in February. Walt, will you really stay?"

"I ain't goin' on ter be caught 'n the storm that's a-comin', you bet. 'N you fellers be off mighty sharp. Cookie'll give yer jaro 'f yer late fur supper."

Tommy remained to wrestle with the fire when Walt went out with the boys.

Carefully and in file they took the trend of the track that led by fierce ways to the out-station, and Walt shivered as Condy's black wide-awake sank below the lip of the slope. He took Commodore to the shed, stabled and petted him, and came again into the day.

All sound and movement were emptied out of this great world of white far-reaching mountains, and withered black pinnacles, and waiting flats that were seamed with Tommy's poison-trenches. It was a cruel world, and too big to be faced by a soul that could feel its power.

Unofficially, Walt knew for one instant the deadly horror that will belong to the last man. And it helped him to understand Tommy.

For this reason he waited until tea was over, and the green logs dried to a glow. Then he forced Tommy's hand relentlessly.

"What's got yer, Tommy? Yer was a fair scally-wag ter the boys, yer know."

"I know," said the boy, and dropped his head in his hands. "I—I'm awfully sorry, Walt, but I couldn't help it. I've been a bit rattled lately, somehow. It's the beastly silence jags me, I think. You get listening and listening, you know—and there's nothing but the thumping of a fellow's heart in his ears. I've prayed for a southerly buster sometimes—just to hear a row; and when one does come I—I can't stand it. Lots of the bunnies squeal brutally when they're dying—but that's worse than the stillness. It—it bothers me, somehow. Of course I'm an ass. But I can't help it."

It morally weakens a man to allow that he cannot help anything. Walt clinched his pipe in his mouth-corner, and wrinkled his eyes at a crumbling sod in the wall.

"'Tain't soft livin' fur none on us up this way; 'n we don't want it ter be. We're tough. Had ter git tough, or chuck it up. I ain't sayin' 's yer 've got the pick o' station work, Tommy, but a feller's got ter chanst that when he takes it on."

"I know," said Tommy.

"'N if fancies come along,"—Tommy's cheeks

were too pinched, and his eyes too big for anything but mind-trouble,—“don't yer let 'em get a holt on yer, Tommy.”

Tommy, crouching before the fire, turned a drawn face over his shoulder.

“Walt, did you ever hear sounds—music, and crying, and all that—when you knew for an absolute fact that there wasn't a living soul within miles and miles? Did you ever hear sounds coming close up behind you, and then going far off, and calling? You know you hear them, and you know they aren't there. And then you begin to think—Walt, do men ever go mad in these kind of places?”

Walt met the terrified soul that looked out of Tommy's eyes, and laughed at it. For it was necessary.

“Don't yer be such a ratty young idjit, Tommy. A feller can fancy anythin' he likes.”

“But I don't like—don't laugh at me, confound you, Walt! I tell you I believe I'm going mad.”

“Then yer 'll come home wi' me ter-morrer,” said Walt slowly. “This has hit yer more 'n I thought, Tommy. Yer 'll come home wi' me ter-morrer, 'n we'll ride turn an' turn.”

“No thanks,” said Tommy Derolles quietly.

Walt grunted.

“Feared o' the boys chiackin' yer? Don't be a bloomin' ass, Tommy. There's not ev'ry chap can stand this life, yer know. Give Lavel two days o' it, 'n yer'll see him come home wi' his tail atween his legs. It knocks him out clean.”

"I'll come back when you send up another man," said Tommy, "but not before. A fellow mustn't funk his work that way—and you know it well enough, Walt. I'll exchange, because I'm not keen on going off my head altogether. But I won't burk. See?"

Walt nodded. This was the creed of a man, and therefore to be comprehended.

"I see. But yer mustn't do't, Tommy. Like's not it'll gravel yer altogether. A feller can't play the fool wi' his nerves, yer know."

Tommy flung more wood on the fire, and smoked for five silent minutes. Then he got up and shook himself.

"Do you mind turning in, Walt? I believe I could get some sleep to-night with your snoring to soothe me."

"Hain't yer bin sleepin'?"

"No. That's at the bottom of it, I suppose. You take the bunk, Walt."

"'Tweren't built fur a six-footer, that thing. Reckon I'll put up wi' the hearthrug."

He kicked off his boots, and rolled in his blankets on the bag before the fire. But Tommy Derolles prepared for bed after the English fashion; and it was the nicety of his pyjamas and sheets that finally keyed Walt up to the knowledge that Tommy was too finely fibred for this sort of life.

Sleep took Walt while the fire was red, and left him again when the wharè was a cold blank dark, filled with the voice of a man singing. Walt knew that it must be a man, and he knew that the man

must be Tommy Derolles, because—by Tommy's voucher—there was none other within miles, many miles.

But the sweat came out on him, and his hair prickled over his head as he listened. For it was not the singing that goes with definite words or tune, and that therefore belongs to earth. There was an ache in it that was like fingers pulling on the heart-strings and making them tell all the things that cannot be spoken. Almost, in the blackness, there might be a damned soul that tried to interpret itself to human understanding; for the beauty of the music rocked into laughter and derision, and straitened into bitterness, and sank, low and very broken, to the sorrow that is beyond tears, because it is beyond hope.

Walt's heart was bobbing in his throat. He turned to the stray closing eyes of the fire, and beat them with the first thing that came to his hand—it was Tommy's cleaning-rod—until they reddened to an angry glare. Then he struck a match to the slush-light, and looked over at Tommy.

He had desired ardently that the ordinary noises of this world should put out that singing. But when he saw Tommy he knew that the noises of this world did not reach his ears.

Tommy sat straightly in the narrow bunk that gave hardly the width allowed to the dead. His eyes were set in an awful listening horror, and he sang as men do not generally sing in drawing-rooms, or anywhere else. As a matter of fact, he was not

singing by his own volition. The pauses told Walt that; so did the knowledge that no soul ever knew such reckless passion while yet the body dulled it.

Walt's sinews weakened, and for a period his will went from him. Then he got himself in hand with an effort, and jumped for Tommy.

"Stop off that row, Tommy. D'yer hear? Stop it off."

Tommy struggled free, and continued to sing. Walt shut the moving mouth with a strong hand, and together they came sideways to the floor, where Tommy broke into wild and unleashed speech, and Walt giggled helplessly at the grotesque horror of it all.

Then came the hour when Tommy wept as a child weeps, and clung to Walt in weak fear, and spoke of the music that haunted him day and night, day and night.

"And it won't go away. Why won't it go away, Walt? It hurts so—oh God! it does hurt so. It makes me sing when it hurts like this. Listen——"

He flung his head up, and Walt listened with every nerve of him. But the world outside was absolutely dead of sound.

"There it is," said Tommy wearily. "Why don't you stop it? I wish you'd stop it."

He rocked himself, and began again. And Walt, because he dared not sit and listen, brewed strong tea in the little billy, and poured it down Tommy until a saner look came to the boy's eyes and saner words to his tongue.

Walt chuckled when Tommy called him "a beastly nuisance," and huddled before the blaze with a blanket over his pyjamas.

"Yer'll come back wi' me ter-morrer, sure 'nuff. Yer worse than Jule wi' the jumps. What kind o' hopra are yer trainin' fur, Tommy?"

"It isn't me," explained Tommy simply. "It must come out of the mountains, I think. They're very much older than we are, you know, and very much wiser; and perhaps they want to tell us things. But it's so sad—so awfully sad. I suppose it's the loneliness—hear that!"

He beat time to a sound that was not there, and Walt, utterly at sea, and much afraid, clapped him over the head.

"Stow it, yer silly juggins, an' talk sense, can't yer? How can I hear moosick when there ain't none?"

"But there is. How could I hear it if it wasn't there?" Then he clutched Walt's knees wildly. "There is! There is, I tell you! Can't you hear it? Walt, can't you hear it? For God's sake, don't tell me that it's only me can hear it!"

"All right," said Walt soothingly. "I'm a bit deaf 'n the off-side—an' I ain't got no ear fur moosick anyhow. Give it a rest, Tommy. Did yer lay all yer trenches yest'd'y?"

"Then I am going mad," said Tommy solemnly. "When none of you seemed to hear this afternoon I—I knew it. I suppose I knew before. But it frightens me. I can't stand it! I can't! Walt, what is it? What do you think it is?"

“Stummick,” said Walt. “It’s mighty cold up here, Tommy, an’ it’s got a holt on yer liver. I’ll take yer out ’n this, an’ send up Harry Morel. He’s made o’ steel springs, body an’ soul—an’ tongue. Stop lookin’ that way, now. There ain’t nothin’ ter make sounds—’nless it be a kea.”

He reached for the latch, but Tommy flung him aside with frantic hands.

“Don’t open it. Don’t! There is—I don’t know what there is outside.”

“There’s a bletherin’ donkey inside, anyways,” said Walt impatiently, and walked out into the night.

There is never absolute dark when the earth is under snow, and though the sodden sky hung low and starless, Walt could see the grey rim where it met the hills, and it was as if a saucepan lid had been fitted over a plate and held there by a mighty hand that would never lift.

Walt went back in great haste, and banged the door behind him.

“Nothin’ ’t all,” he said defiantly. “Did yer—did yer ever see anythink, Tommy?”

“No. Fan did.”

“Rot. A dog’s got too much sense ter see what ain’t there. Where is she?”

“I killed her.” Tommy spoke slowly, for his teeth chattered. “She used to lie with her nose under the door, and whine, and scratch. And once I let her out, and she fought with something—I heard her. But when I went to look in

daylight there were only her own tracks. And I knew she saw—what I couldn't see. And it frightened me. So I killed her."

"My land!" said Walt. His mind groped slowly round the subject, and slid off it. "There can't be things when they ain't there. It's yer nerves gone ratty, Tommy. But I'm blowed ef yer wouldn't make even me funky ef yer kep' on wi' much more o' this. Could yer hev a snooze up agin me, eh? Here, by the fire?"

Tommy's eyes were sunken and dulled, and his voice showed his utter exhaustion. Whatever the power that had held him, it worked on him most cruelly.

"I'll have a try," he said, and fell asleep on Walt's shoulder with the words unfinished.

The clouds rolled like solid grey waves through a windy sky when Walt awoke, cramped and uneasy. He tucked Tommy in the blankets tenderly, and the tired boy-face troubled him as he lit the half-burnt logs with kindling from another larder-shelf, and made a damper with the skilful hand of the stockman.

"I can't stay myself. An' he won't go; I know he won't go. There's grit ter him, fur all the fear o' his mind. But I reckon he'll go clean dotty ef I can't git Harry up ter-morrer."

Tommy was suspicious and sulky until he discovered how much Walt knew. Then he was ashamed, and threatened Walt with evil things if he talked this into a scandal.

"What made yer do't?" demanded Walt,

saddling Commodore out in the grey slush beyond the doorway.

Tommy prevaricated shamelessly.

"I learnt singing at home—when I was in the choir at Jesus."

"Not that sort o' singin', yer didn't. Git yer coat, Tommy. Yer comin' on wi' me."

"I'm not. I told you that before."

"If 't comes snow I mightn't git a chap up fur a week."

Walt's keen eyes met Tommy's; but Tommy stood firm.

"I can't help that. I've got to stand till you send out the relief-guard. I guess you're going to catch that jolly old buster you promised the others. Look at the drift reefing up over the Two-Thumb."

The heads of all the ranges were wrapped in grey blankets, and the long stretch of low hills held that breathless waiting iciness which is sure forerunner of snow. Walt climbed to the saddle dubiously, rubbing his nose.

"Yer settin' too tight, lad. 'Tain't wuth it. Come along, Tommy."

"No. I funk at night—you've seen that. But when I start funking in daylight, I'll stick my head in a drift, and leave it there. You get out, Walt."

"I'll send Harry up soon's I can. But if there's snow——"

"I can stand it out all right," said Tommy Derolles. "Good-bye."

"S'long," said Walt, and put Commodore to the

tread of the hill. And he did not look back where Tommy stood whitefaced in the white snow.

For, after all, a man must serve his work faithfully, uncounting the cost. This is the lesson of the hill-country, and the Mindoorie boys had learnt it.

The yawning gorges took Walt; the unending slopes spread counterpanes before him, and the storm caught him beyond the saddle, when the way lay safe and savagely cold to the out-station. He found new interest in the shadowing mountains that shouldered their drifts on to him—for Tommy's words anent them had not been spoken in jest.

"It's suthin' worse 'n liver wi' him when he goes reckonin' them things does his toonin'-up fur him. But, my land! What a heap they cud tell if—they cud!"

Straightway, Commodore pitched into a ten-foot snow-heap, so that Walt forgot Tommy until the station lights winked out of the night that had come at four of the afternoon. And by then he knew with certainty that no man would tread that track to the wharè for three full days to come.

But it was the morning of the fourth day before he took it with Harry Morel. Harry cared not for god nor devil; neither did he regard man. Wherefore, it was good that he should go to this place, in which—without doubt—both devil and god were waking.

The earth dazzled under the level spear-lights of a sun that stood in a bare, bright amethyst sky; and knob, scarp, gully-top, and towering mountain

from right and left, and from very far ahead, flung back all the uncertain nameless colours of a diamond. The clean air came over the snow-wastes with that tingling vigour which freezes hands and feet, and swings the heart out into the mad conquering exultance that belongs only to man when he comes in touch with the life that is greater than his.

Harry was chanting camp songs as the horses paddled over the flats or floundered into holes that were blue as the sky at bottom. But his singing was not at all as the singing of Tommy.

"He won't hear no moosick what ain't bin printed," decided Walt, lying forward as they rode under snow-logged black birches; "an' good fur him it is, too. Natur's queer enough wi'out that."

A bush-robin flew before them up the last pinch of the track that flared to the hill-crest and ended. Its wings were blots of ink against the whiteness that was unbroken until, presently, the trail crossed the brown scars of Tommy's poison-trenches. Some half-dozen furry bodies of a paler brown bore witness of the death that comes unseen; but about them, and about the wharè to rightward, the glitter of snow was unsoiled.

Walt pushed forward with fear puckering his heart. For the wharè door was close shut, and sunlight struck the window to a blank yellow.

"Lazy beggar," said Harry, easing the girths promptly as his station hack blew out its nostrils, and stood sweating with slackened sinews, "Snoozing, I bet."

Walt jerked up the latch with the pulses throbbing in his ears. All the world was so hideously quiet. It was Tommy who had told him that the ranges listened when the wind was asleep.

"Hullo, Tommy," he called, and was brought up standing by the door. For it gave not one inch under his hand.

"Wedged it, I suppose," suggested Harry. "Yell at him. Tommy! Come out of that, you waster."

Walt swung round with the point of his shoulder to the door-jamb, and his lean jaws were set.

"Ef 't don't go, put yerself inter it too," he said, and laid all his body-weight to meet the pressure.

The door gave slowly, and from the top, and that which blocked it slid away heavily and noiselessly.

"Tommy," cried Walt, with something unknown feeling coldly about his heart.

He jumped through the narrow opening, and fell over the Thing which had wedged the door. It was very stiff and cold where his hands slid on it, and that was how he came to understand why Tommy had made no answer.

"But he was looking under the door," said Harry, when they had lifted the dead Thing into the bunk, and shut down the staring eyes. "Now, what the deuce was he looking under the door for?"

Walt was shivering in the raw sunshine that flooded the wharè.

“He was lookin’ fur things—what his dog used ter see. Spirits, or suthin’.”

Harry Morel bent over the bunk for the space of a minute.

“I fancy he found what he was looking for,” he said quietly. “And it didn’t scare him, either. If I have a face like that when I come to die, I’ll think myself jolly lucky.”

Walt remembered that in the day when Harry had to meet the death that waited. But now he leaned against the lintel, and stared into the void with eyes that were blind as Tommy’s.

“He said as he cu’d stand it out. An’ he did—clear ter the end. An’ he said as how the mountings knew. Damn ’em! They keeps it pretty close! He had ter die alone.”

Harry Morel came away from the bunk with his hands in his pockets.

“I’m not so sure about that,” he said.

THE STORY OF WI.

“ And if I have taken the common clay,
And shaped it cunningly
In the form of a god that was digged a sod,
The greater honour to me.”

HE was a clod when Lane found him—a piece of six-year-old Maori flesh, with the carriage of a conqueror, and the tongue of a dissolute gutter-snipe, and the brown of the earth that bore him in his supple skin. Lane was looking for land in those days, and waded deep in the waters of indecision before he finally paid tithe to Mindoorie in the province of Southland. He had searched Taranaki, Wairarapa, and Auckland in the north, and had fallen foul of many native kiangas where the pakeha was unwelcome. He had nearly got himself mere'd (this is done with a thing like a tomahawk) a score of times, and in those ways he assimilated some unofficial dregs of Maori information.

Then he met Wi—which is, in full, Wiremu Poananga—which is, in translation, William Clematis. Wi's father was dead in a coastal raid, and Wi's mother, being sick, was cast out, according to custom, that she might die without defilement

to the pa. This she obligingly did, and Wi sat on her body out in the white sunlight, and beat her with his baby fists because she took no heed of him.

Lane rode past, and he hooked up the child with his crop-handle under the armpit, and demanded explanation in his broken Maori from the men who lolled at the gates.

They could not touch the body until certain formulæ had been observed, for the Maori body is sacred, both in life and death. And they could not touch Wi, for Wi had touched the Thing on the grass. This was made clear whilst Wi stood up, defiant in his nakedness, and hurled all the bad words of his knowledge at the pakeha. He was grandly built (but this is a race-mark. Maoris make the finest footballers in the world until they grow tallowy from over-eating), and his strong little face had none of the round-eyed stolidity of the ordinary Maori infant.

“He’s too good to go loafing about in a pa all his days,” said Lane, and forthwith sought out Wi’s only remaining relative. For Wi came of a tribe that had fallen on evil days, but—in some crosswise fashion—he had the blood of Te Arawa in his veins.

The woman who belonged to Wi was old and toothless, and a smoker of some sixty years’ standing. She spoke no English, and understood less. But Lane made pantomime with his tobacco-pouch and the wrathful Wi, and in due time the bargain was struck. The pa provided Wi with a

shirt that came to his middle, and trousers that buttoned over the shoulders and made him behave outrageously. Then Lane set him on the horn of the saddle, and took him away to be fashioned into a pakeha. It was the act of a very young man, and it was quite possible that it would lead to complications later on. But Lane gloried in the knowledge that it was a chance in three lifetimes, Maoris being notoriously devoted to their babies, and won the love of the fierce little heart in a week.

"What are you going to do with the brat?" asked Brazenose when Lane came back to town. "He follows you round like a poodle-dog, and he does seem to have a mortal dislike to clothes. Besides, he will be most sinfully jealous when you form other ties."

When Lane left England, he had said in his wrath that he would never marry. And it may here be noted that he kept that oath.

"We'll meet that when it comes. Just now I've to teach him our lingo, and cleanly habits. He's quick in the uptake. And I want to see how the Maori temperament stands English training."

This was, of course, before education of the native became a matter of custom, and Brazenose grinned his derision. Wi had left a double row of teeth-marks in his arm that morning.

"You'll find it a dangerous amusement, then. The imp has too much devil in him for my taste."

But Lane understood the plucky, passionate baby soul rather better.

"Don't you believe it. He'll be a fine man one day. There's spunk in the little beggar. I thrashed him yesterday, and never got a chirp out of him. 'Hurt him properly, too, and he took it like a man. Yes; I'll make something valuable out of Wi 'fore all's done."

"Wish you joy," said Brazenose, unconvinced.

But Lane laughed, and betook himself without fear to the making of Wi.

Wi was a round-eyed and solemn infant, with strong white teeth that tested all strange things, from the soap in Lane's dressing-room to saddle-straps and a new half-sovereign. This last he folded as fingers fold paper, and sealed with indent of sharp teeth; and Lane wore it on his watch-chain until his death.

Every dog in the town followed the child, and he played in the gutters with those of his race, and was severely whipped in consequence quite three times a week. Lane ruled with a stern but absolutely just hand, and there came to Wi slowly some notions of truth and uprightness—the two things which nature has not bestowed on the Maori in any prodigality.

It is very true that he found delight in sinning up to the full of his power; but his unbreakable love for Lane was such that it ever gave to the man the victory when the two wills met. Men at the club called the child "Lane's joke," and took much pleasure in teasing him until Wi learnt

the futility of losing his temper, and wielded the cunning of his tongue instead. Then Lane began really to feel the burden of responsibility. Through the months that rushed into the years Wi drank of more bitter waters than are usually poured for the young, and tasted maturer joys. For, like all aboriginals, he ripened out of his time, and was wise in things that a boy should not know before the down came on his lip. In the school where he mixed with pakeha boys alone he brought trouble on his black head at the first. He used their speech and their games, but he held his own by the power of his fist, and sang most improper songs of love and war and hate in the dormitories of nights. And when the Head made objection, Wi mimicked him down the corridor-length, and went from his punishment to sin again.

Lane came in the first term-time to see how many of the commandments the boy had broken. For well he knew that not to all pakeha is the Maori brother under the skin.

He walked on to the playground with the Head; and Wi, having picked himself out of a practise scrum, galloped up the field headlong, capless, with gleaming eyes and teeth.

He shook hands with a white man's grip, and gave his greeting in a white man's tongue. Lane looked him over in complete satisfaction.

"And that's all right. You are a regular pakeha now, Wi."

"Wai? I am more than the pakeha," said the boy, strutting. "I can lick every chap here

'cept Calf Richards, and he's learnt boxing. I want to learn boxing too, pater."

"You've licked 'em all?" demanded Lane, For there were well over a hundred boys in the two houses, and Wi had been there just three months.

"All that were big enough." The quick blood blackened Wi's face. "They called me 'pononga!' E-E-! Nga tangata kino!"

"Pononga" means slave. It is the one epithet which the Maori will not forgive when it is used with intent.

"It's not unlike Poananga," suggested Lane, hiding a grin. "Perhaps they knew no better."

"They know now," said Wi, balancing on one foot. "May I learn boxing—soon?"

"Well," said Lane, "but you mustn't kill 'em all, Wi. You're too strong for your years already."

"To be strong is best of all things," said Wi decidedly. And Lane laughed, half agreeing.

Providence had attended to the boy's outward person with more elaboration than was absolutely necessary; and it is certain that Lane gloried as deep in the well-hung limbs and clean-shaped face and neck as in the spirit that he had handled with so much love until it stood up, unashamed and eager, and fearless with the childlike faith that is altogether Maori. Wi poised his body as no Englishman can, or ever will do, and his lines, though fine and thoroughbred, already gave promise of enormous strength. It was in his

strength that Wi took all the pride and delight of a young animal—and in his knowledge of woodcraft—and in the fortune which had given him two languages wherewith to scourge the boy who angered him.

But his temper was purely terrible at times; and when he sought to slay the Mindoorie cook with a sheath-knife, Lane flogged him until his arm fell limp, drawing blood before repentance. The repentance came at the midnight, when Wi faced Lane where he smoked an uneasy pipe in the study, and told him in lordly words that he was forgiven. This, for the Maori blood in the boy. The white training showed next, and then Lane dressed the raw back with pitiful fingers, concurring in Wi's suggestion that slit green-hide should not be used hereafter.

But Lane put no physical punishment on Wi again; for it is not possible to flog an elephant without dual loss of dignity, and very soon men began to fear Lane's little brown boy because of his powerful body. The casual observer called him fat. But those who saw him stripped for fight on the football field knew the meaning of the mighty knobs that swelled and shifted under the yellow jersey, and ran in following ripples down the brown shining limbs.

"You'll have the fellow a prize-fighter 'fore all's done," warned Brazenose: but Lane took no heed, designing other ends for Wi.

Wi was to go into the House, and speak for the rights of his own people. He was to learn

the worth of the soil which his own people had ceased to hold. He was to impress on them the need for sobriety, and for much more beside, if they hoped to continue a factor in the land.

Wi knew all about it. And when his school-time was passed, he came down to Mindoorie to tell Lane that he could not do this thing.

It was hard to tell, and Wi came at it crudely, so that Lane sat up in the verandah chair, and looked with eyes that Wi had not seen before.

"Yes? You intend to set yourself against all that I have worked and planned for since you were six years old? This needs explanation, I think. Well?"

"Don't put it like that," said Wi, and choked.

"I will put it like that. Well?" Then as Wi continued in silence, Lane turned on him fiercely. "What is it? Brazenose always said—— Is it prize-fighting, or—a woman?"

This tickled Wi.

"Not either, exactly," he said, chuckling gently. "It is—I want to go into the Church."

"The Church!" Lane sat down suddenly. "The Church! Rubbish!"

"I must," said Wi, his great hands gripping and ungripping. "A man needn't be a softy because he preaches—can't be, if he means to go among my folk. I've been thinking it over these two years, pater. And there are several reasons——"

"Yes?" Lane had himself in hand again, "We will have them, please."

Wi lifted his shoulders as if he was fitting them to a load. He stood up—about two yards high and one thick—in the fading evening, and the spare grizzled man watched him unflinchingly.

The men were singing down at the wharès, and Cortiss' gay shout led the way. Wi waited until the music had died in laughter. Then he said slowly—

“Speaking largely, you white men have taken away our beliefs, and not bothered much about giving us anything in exchange. And there is nothing messes up a race so much as want of religion. We don't stick to our own codes of honour, and—so far—we have not assimilated yours. This is what will knock us out, body and soul, unless we can learn better. I have learnt better, and I'm going to pass the knowledge on to my people.”

“Get someone else to do it,” said Lane. “Wi, you are a born speaker. I knew it when you first swore at me in the pa. You'd be much more use in Parliament.”

“The Native question is over-handled there already. They all want to roof in the house before the floor-plates are laid. I think I could lay some floor-plates,” said Wi, with grave sincerity. “You must let me serve my own people, pater. I belong to them.”

“You belong to me,” said Lane sharply.

“No.” The dark blood ran to Wi's forehead. “I owe you everything—don't think I forget that—but I was Maori before you took me.”

“Well?” Lane sighed impatiently. “You said there were several reasons?”

A weka was calling to his mate from the flax in the paddock-creek. The notes were indescribably mournful, and Wi shivered as he answered.

“I am stronger than any man I have ever stripped to. I am stronger than any man I have ever seen, I think. And we Maori are not as you pakeha. Our passions have not had the centuries of repression. I have a very devil of a temper—you should know that—and it is so easy——” He ran his hand up his left forearm, and flung it out in explanation. Maoris make half their speech with their bodies.

“Ah,” said Lane, understanding that Wi feared himself. “And so you wish to make the Church your whipper-in? That is very noble of you, Wi.”

Wi made a quick step, and for just one moment Lane saw how the Maoris of old put terror into their enemies. It was not a nice sight at all.

The look died.

“You didn’t mean to hit quite so hard, pater. All right. No; I’m not seeing this as a coward. I didn’t think to have to tell you that.” Then his voice grew rougher, as if some great force drove it. “I cannot swing in a rata-loop always. I must choose the above or below. Already I have fought more desires than you ever will; and do you think I do not know the hearts of my people? We are a very noble race, but we can sin most fully on all counts that your religion forbids. Your faith

is my faith; by training first, and now by choice. And my people are mine by blood. I think you will understand, perhaps——” He broke off abruptly, and his free light step beat out up the drive where the shadows were thickest.

A Maori can never be absolutely frank. He has too many generations that guarded life with the tongue behind him. But Wi gave to this white man more, much more, than the native generally gives, and Lane was not ungrateful.

To prove it, he sunk his own desires, making no parade, and sent Wi to a Maori Theological College that he might learn among men of his caste. Since Wi was to give his life to the brown man, it were better that he should not become too English.

Brazenose laughed when he heard of it.

“Wi will convert his hearers by force,” he said. “And he is morally certain to be chucked out before he is priested. He hasn't an over-good record, and Nature never intended him for this kind of thing. What's the idea?”

“Don't,” said Lane. “Wi makes me ashamed. He follows the God of our fathers with more reverence than nine-tenths of us do. You know how dead earnest a Maori is when he gets set on a thing? Wi is putting all his soul into this.”

“Bah! He'll soon be sick of a student life.”

“Don't you believe it,” said Lane; and his keen eyes softened, recalling a memory. “He took me to his own church last time I was up north. They hold the services both in Maori and English, and the students read the lessons. Wi read one—in

Maori—and you know he's got a voice like a bird on the tree. The sun came in just the same on the hideous gods they've got carved on the walls, and the white stone font, and the black bent heads. I tell you it made me feel—feel as I haven't felt——”

“And that's no argument at all,” said Brazenose irreverently. “Wi's made a good many men feel as they haven't felt—and a good many women too, I don't doubt.”

“Not to his knowledge, I think. And that bothers me sometimes. Wi will have to go lonely all his days. He's not likely to look at a Maori, and he daren't look at a white girl.”

Between the Maori man and the Maori woman there is all this difference. The woman, by herself, by her daughters and grand-daughters, may mate with a white man. For the Maori man there is nothing of this kind. No white woman weds with him, to the third generation. And he, knowing it, shapes his life accordingly, and has no desire that it should be otherwise. In his dignified soul he has toleration for the alien, and perhaps a little contempt.

But Wi had been bred to love an Englishman, and he had lived among pakeha until he had forgot this unwritten law. And it was so that the mischief fell.

Besides,—and this fired temptation,—the old woman who charred for the house-master spoke no more than the voice of the town when she said, “It's a strong body takes a woman more 'n looks,

and he's got both, wi' a cunning tongue added. You take it from me, Mrs. Blayne, he's the boy for the gels."

"An' fur more than the gels," said Mrs. Blayne over her teacup; and the other chuckled comfortably.

"Well, listen now. I seed 'em go by this mornin'—him an' the little Eru chap—a-carryin' water fur the bilers. 'Hillo, old lady,' says he. 'Gimme that bucket till I put it up the steps fur yer.' 'Yer might put meself up too,' says I, chaffin', 'seein' as there's ten on 'em.' An' as I'm a livin' soul, he picks me up immediate like I was a skein o' pack-thread, an' dumps me on the verandah wi' the bucket. An' me no fairy neither."

Mrs. Blayne agreed without reservation.

"Must ha' the strength of a elegant," she said.

"An' the reach of it too, barrin' the trunk. I thought I stud six fut from him. 'What'll yer want fur payment?' says I, gigglin' an' gaspin'; fur he'd rucked up me apron like a man holdin' a baby. 'Jest this,' says he, an' kisses me fair on the mouth. Then they goes off laughin', him swingin' head an' shoulders above Eru. And I didn't wipe off that kiss, though maybe I'll not tell my old man of it."

The college students did their own work, and Henare Poihewa, whose father was so great a chief that his real name could never be mentioned, thought it no shame to scrub out his cubicle twice a week. He did it very well too.

It was this same Henare who went with Wi the first night that he met the Little White Girl. There were other girls in the room, but none so white and so small. Wi could have broken her between his palm and three fingers, and this made him feel clumsy for the first time in his life. But he sang to her instead—sang the strange Maori chants that have no scored music, and that tug at the heart-strings of the pakeha and hurt him, because he knows that he is for ever outside the mystical, unexplainable power that begets them. And it happened that he made the Little White Girl cry—stealthily behind her hand, that none might see. But Wi saw; and he went home treading on air, to find relief in wiping the floor with Rau Wilson, who had annexed his blanket.

In the next months Wi saw the Little White Girl weekly—at picnics, and at all other places where it is possible for two people to talk apart from the eyes and ears of all the world. The Little White Girl said openly that Wi was quite adorable; and Wi, in innocent sincerity, began to desire her for his very own. And now would have entered the element of danger if Wi had not been training his spirit for higher things. For the savage overword is might, and the Little White Girl did not know it.

Then it grew near to the time when Wi must take his deacon's orders; and Lane, setting things in careful train that he might go up and see it done, had his world struck away beneath him by a frantic letter from the Principal. It implied that

Wi was possessed of madness and many devils, and implored Lane to come straightway.

Lane went that night. There was a heavy sea outside the Heads, and the boat laboured like a tortured soul. But she could not have known anything about the torture of Lane's soul.

It was because he understood so much of that part of the Maori which cannot be tabulated that Lane was afraid. When such as Wi give up the game, it is better to forget that they were once true men. For the memory will be painful. Wi had cleansed himself for his work in all faithfulness and honesty, but—Lane shivered, tramping the wet deck. He knew the savage drop in the blood which nothing could purge. Yet it does not poison the veins of more than one man in three hundred.

The Principal was upset, and much annoyed with Wi. Brazenose, when the thing became public, said that he did not wonder. It appeared that Wi had come in one night, and comprehensively cursed the College—all that it contained, all that it said, did, and was. He had then thrown Ware Taureka, who attempted to hold him, and put out his shoulder; and when finally overpowered by numbers, had surged into slow-dropping Maori, which—to judge by the faces of his companions, the Principal himself being a literary scholar exclusively—was unfit for the ears of divinity students, or anyone else.

Lane remembered the little brown boy who had railed at him in the pa; and he remembered all the patient years that had gone between.

"Where is he? I want to see him—now."

"He is confined to a small room over the stair, pending a reply from the Bishop. His expulsion will, of course, be necessary—his public expulsion. We must do what we can to ameliorate the effects of this disgraceful affair. Not that I am alarmed for the others. They are good, steady lads——"

"Will you kindly allow me to see him at once?" asked Lane in a desperation that shook him as the Principal took him up the narrow uncarpeted stairs that Wi's feet had helped to hollow.

"He will give no reasons to anyone," said the Principal, fitting the key in the lock. "He is absolutely sullen and uncaring."

Lane nodded. If Wi had not been uncaring he would long since have broken in the door that stood between him and liberty.

"I will see him alone," he said. "No, I am not afraid. Wi will not hurt me. Did you forget that he is my adopted son?"

Then the Principal muttered something about being sorry, and went away, leaving the grate of a lock behind him, and the silence of the two in the room.

Wi turned round. He was thinner than when Lane had last seen him; but that might be the result of closer study. His manner was courteous and easy as ever, and his handshake firm. But behind the big dark eyes there was a something shut down. The one was a native; the other the white of a usurping race. Lane felt it, as Wi intended that he should.

"What is it, Wi?" asked Lane simply, and put a hand on the broad shoulder.

Wi stood without speech or movement.

"Did you know how you had crumpled that fellow up?" said Lane. "The cross throw, was it? 'Must have been a plucky man to stand up to you."

The child-side purred under the praise.

"He hadn't a hope. None of them had a hope if they'd come singly. But they spilt on me like shingle from a tip-dray." He swerved aside. "Won't you sit down? I've only a bed, and it creaks——"

"You're looking a bit off colour, Wi." Lane was feeling his way carefully, for the Maori mind has many windings, and no white man may hope to hold the clue. But this seared a raw place somewhere, and Wi spoke thickly.

"Off colour! I can never be off colour. Not when I am dying—not when I'm dead. Look at my hands."

He held them out with the quick grace that never allowed his bulk to be clumsy, and Lane stared at them, puzzled, seeing nothing new.

He had always known that Wi was dark among his kind. For where the sun touched him he was purplish-brown; he bruised ink-blackly, and his finger-nails were burnt-sienna.

"Don't be an owl," very sharply. "What does that matter?"

"I can never be white, can I? Prayers can't make me white. I've tried—I've tried. My body

is black, and my soul is therefore black. That is what you pakeha think. That is what you think, oh, hunga mohio."

He was wild with a passion that made his young face terrible. But his will took command as Lane cried—

"Wi—for God's sake——"

"Keep your white God for speech with white people. He is the pakeha God. Ia tuku! He is not mine. I have served Him—your God—and His tamariki laugh at me. Aue! Naku ano i mea, i he ai ahau. But I will not any more. Keep your white God, for He is nothing to the Maori."

"This is blasphemy, Wi. Are you gone mad?"

But to Lane the slow, incisive voice was more hopelessly awful than any madness which runs all ways.

"Ka te noa," said Wi, without interest, and squatted on the floor. "Are you going?"

Lane cast his eyes round the bare room in search of some weapon to drive home. A psalm-book of Wi's lay on the floor, brought up, probably, by Henare. It had been dog-eared, and well loved once. It was desecrated shreds now, ground underfoot. Lane looked from it to Wi, sitting still and stolid. The attitude was comically suggestive, but Lane was not seeing fun just then. Wi was pakeha no more. That was all it told him.

"Wi," he said, and went to him. "Because I have been father to you all these years, tell me what has happened. Tell me, dear old chap."

Wi stood up; and it was his breaking voice in

the little dark room that came back to trouble Lane in lonely evenings on Mindoorie.

"How can I believe your Bible that does not speak truth? It calls all men rite — equal. Then am I not a man? Yet am I like a man, though some say I am liker a bullock. But if the pakeha is not for the Maori, then is the pakeha's religion not for the Maori. So to Atua shows it. Thy God shall be thy God, and thy God only. And thy maidens shall be thine, and thine only. It is quite plain. Oh, most truthfully does the white man call the brown his brother!"

"The Little White Girl," thought Lane; and under his breath he did not wish her well. "Just so, Wi. You are not a man. You are a child that cries and beats the earth because it is not smooth as a passion-fruit rind."

"No," said Wi; and the something behind his eyes was lifted that Lane might understand quite fully. "A man is a coward who cannot stand up under sorrow. I am not a coward. It is because I did not see before. I am strong, but that has no hold against things that are not of the flesh. How can that be given with the one hand which is taken away with the other? The Maori is not fit to love the tamaiti—the child of your God? Then is he not fit to love your God. That is all. I have learned it—learned it. I will not forget."

"And all this because a white girl has played with you," said Lane.

Wi sprang with a snarl, swung the other man up, and Lane looked to have his head rammed

between his shoulders against the wall. But he came again to his feet unhurt, and Wi stood still. It was a mightier self-control than Lane had seen in a man before.

“I beg your pardon most earnestly, Wi,” he said.

“Do you not see,”—Wi paid out his words as if each gave him separate pain,—“that this is the foreword of all? The white and the black are meant to be two peoples for ever. And your faith teaches that they are one. Then is your faith false that I have loved. There is no future for the Maori. He has sloughed his religion, and that of the pakeha is not for him. What shall I go into the pas and kiangas to teach my people?”

It was the white training that drove Wi to give explanation where he honestly believed explanation to be due. But the spirit shaping this was not within Lane's comprehension. Only he saw that trouble had been averted for the Little White Girl in exactly inverse ratio to the payment given by the man.

“But that is not the law of God,” he said. “It is mere outward observance. Can't you believe——”

“No, I cannot believe. This has eaten into me until it has eaten all belief away. I will go to my own gods. They are many, and I can cut new ones out of wood if I like. But I think that I will not believe them either.”

Lane had thought to tell Wi fearfully of the disgrace that waited him. Very nearly, he laughed to remember. When a man has lost his hold on eternity he does not regard the wrath of his kind.

A Maori is generally dignified—even in European clothes. The tragedy of a dying race was in Wi just then. Lane watched the impassive dark face where the light from the little window touched it, and his voice was broken.

“What will you do, then?”

Wi lifted his shoulders. It was a curious trick he had sometimes, as if a weight bowed him.

“There will be fuss here first, I suppose. They will talk, and talk again; and the Head will call me evil names. But he does not know all I called him that he had taught me lies for so long. The boys know. Ware laughed. He said I was drunk. That is why I would have killed him. And then I will go away. Any way; it does not matter. And I will sit in the sun, and smoke, and drink brandy. And if Ware comes again to tell me that I am drunk, I will pull him in half. In our creed there is no punishment after death. So perhaps this is better.”

“And have you forgotten me?”

There was a quick movement from the window. But it stilled again.

“No, I have not forgotten you. I think I should have been angry once if it had been said that I should leave you. But it does not matter now. I will not live with you again. The pakeha has cheated my trust through all these years. He has given his Bible and withheld the application. I have not forgotten that either. No; I go to my own gods.” Then, as in the old days, his eyes were shot with the craftiness of the savage. This was

inevitable when you remember all that had gone before. But it made Lane heartsick to see it come.

“That was a game you played with me, oh, atawhai pakeha; and it has hurt. But I shall sit in the sun and drink brandy, for I have no care to live. I know too much, and I am too little. And all white men are liars. This is the ending.”

And Lane went out.

AMONG MEN.

'Oh dear! I've been seeing a lot of funny things lately:
Things far worse than what I've been told—
I'm a poor little novice that's out in the cold.'

La Poupee.

MINDOORIE was shearing. This means very nearly as much in a big New Zealand shed as stocktaking means in a National Emporium, and it is not quite so cleanly. She was girt by a steel ring of unbroken custom, and within every bearing was heated by work—savage, machine-driven work.

Men wrought with sheep in the yards, in the races, in the paddocks. Men wrought with sheep in the shed. Twenty-four held place on the boards alone: stripped each to greasy trousers and singlet; bowed in the back eternally, and dripping with the sweat of exhaustion and close heat. For the tallies were high, and the sheep clean, and the unrest of competition shook from every man all the strength he could give—and more. The fleecies pattered the lines unendingly, with feet that grew tender and throbbed like a toothache, and virulent speech when occasion demanded. The classers were silent at the tables, set-lipped, and rapid; but the bare-chested, bare-armed gang

that swarmed over the presses worked bars and cranks to a tune of their own that mixed with the grate of iron.

Hales was on at the bales for a brief half-hour. He ran a pack-needle through the fleshy part of his thumb, and retired to get lock-jaw at ease. He said the men strove as though serving a gun in the field—it may be noted that Hales' own experience ran no further than skittle alleys—and he also said that his very soul was out of breath. This was bald truth, and more than one man knew it privately, and on his own account.

And assuredly the shed was desperately hot, and of smells unbelievable.

Cortiss, having brought sheep from the wide air and sunlight to fill his detailed board pens in the reek, reversed engines promptly as duty allowed, took the last seven feet in a jump, and spat over the race-edge with emphasis.

Harry Morel was hauling on the drop-gate where the mobs jostled and cried.

“Bit rancid?” he asked.

“Decayed,” said Cortiss, and looked with the eye of the apart on the mates of his bosom who shouted and beat and swung little gates in the dust of the swarming yards. “Gittin’ Walt on ’is ’ind-legs proper, it is. ’E was prancin’ roun’ that rabbit-skinner what signed on larst night—an’ I don’t deny ’e is cuttin’ ’is jumbucks into fancy pattrons all right.”

“What’s the fellow’s pen?” demanded Harry climbing on the rail to fill his pipe.

"Accident. He-ve-ry time. Number one haccident ward on the left. Hop'rations goin' on public *hand* permiskus. I 'ad th' pleasure o' 'earin' Walt. 'You've come to the wrong shop,' 'e says, sarcastic. 'It's a tailor's where you're wantin',' 'e says. Rabbit-skiner looks at 'is trousies, that was showin' pink at the knees, an' 'e grins sickly. 'We don't cut the wool into coats' an' ladies' ridin'-'abits at this stage o' proceedin's,' Walt says—you know 'im w'en 'e's 'alf a-leanin' back, wi' 'is 'ands in 'is pockets, an' 'is heyes 'alf shut, hand ready to knock the 'ead off of you 'fore you've right thought out your cheek? Well, 'You're puttin' too much science into this,' 'e says. 'I'll forgive you if you don't do no more 'n the rest,' 'e says. Then the leather-'ead shearin' next luffed an' said suthin' what tickled up Rabbit-skiner, what went for 'im, shears an' all. Ho, yes. Flagrant suthin'-r-other, o' course. So Walt settled 'em both, an' I come out."

"Ah." Harry slid off the rail and went where Franklin was calling. "This weather does draw out a fellow's temper, y' know."

"Like a bottle drorin' a bile on your neck," said Cortiss feelingly. "It don't disperse your temper wi' hany continuency, though. Reckon that fancy cutter 'll git 'is walkin'-ticket over it."

Walt's thoughts marched this track also. He went up to the tables.

"Look out f'r skin on all the carroty fleecy brings," he said. "I jest bin down warnin' a chap."

The classer on the left nodded, and beckoned a boy in the same nod.

"Clear out these skirtings again," he said; and Walt passed on to the presses.

A shed boss must know all that breathes under the roof, though it be beyond sight or hearing. Lane said that Walt was omnipotent when he liked, and this was not altogether hyperbole.

Rabbit-skinner felt his power long after the lean man had gone, and he chipped at his sheep painstakingly. He had tramped the country this eight months for a job, and got it by specious lying when Hazlitt had broken the full tale of Mindoorie boards by ripping up his forearm with a shear-point.

One year he had shorn in the cart-stable at home, with his father beside him and his sister as fleecy, and he knew that he knew all about it.

But this life put fear into him straightway. It was too strenuous, too fierce, too awful in its cheerful technical elaboration. At his shoulder a big Maori was making the pace; opening up in scientific fashion with a clean-run cut over the ear-root. At the next blow the fleece purred away in rolled foam. He was not good to look at, that Maori, with the thick lips drawn back from the great dog-teeth; but he handled his sheep in the grace and ease of an artist. Beyond was Michael, a ringer of an ordinary three hundred, lithe, slender, and undistressed, filling his pen with white bodies smooth as jellies from a mould. Beyond and

beyond were others—men who knew their work to the bed-rock; men to whom the intricacies of an unyoked mob in drought time, or a twenty-chinned merino, were as nothing.

Rabbit-skinner began forcibly to feel that he was an impostor. He let his scarred sheep through the door, and a fleecy paused by him.

“Do yer pervide baskits fur carryin’ this—this rice?” he demanded; then added, as the red blood leapt to Rabbit-skinner’s face, “or a pinny ’ll do if yer hev one handy.”

The Maori shot out a compelling arm, and annexed the fleecy by the slack of his one garment and the right ear.

“I have a thing handier still,” he said, and gave it generously.

Rabbit-skinner was shamed beyond gratitude. He gulped as he dashed at another ram that was fleshly, and sinfully shaped. And then the relentless noises of the shed took him by the heartstrings again. The quick washing click of the shears; the labouring breath of the clock-work figures that swing steadily as though run on a connecting-rod; the clatter of small hooves on the gratings and grind of the teeth; the harsh under-grunt of the presses, and swift-flung word or song; and above all the long, grateful gasp from the cramped chest when a man for a moment stands upright between sheep and sheep. These are the things that every man knows who has served the seasons through. But they were all too strong for Rabbit-skinner. His legs shook; his back was a live

pain ; his hand refused to guide the shears or his knees to steady the sheep. But the tale of long hours ran out, hard and slow, and the last bell gave tongue and ceased.

"Oh, it's all sereno for you," said Lavel, way-laying a posse of shearers turned wharèwards. "You can lie on yer bloomin' backs an' swill till mornin'. We got ter go draftin' an' movin' yet—jest so's you can stan' still an'—chop."

Lavel was out of love with the universe. Rabbit-skinners did not know, and took it for direct assault.

"C-could I—give you a hand—or anything?" he asked, with desire to please.

Lavel stared. Then he swung on his heel.

"When we let any blanky shearer mess round our yards," he said, "we use him as dog. Guess you ain't got the pace fur that."

"Who you callin' blanky shearer?" demanded a hairy one, dropping his slouch for the first position of defiance.

"Tell yer later," said Lavel, sheering off. "I'm busy. But I'll give yer me card arter tea."

He gave it—as usual—in the person of Franklin ; and—by Cortiss' sworn word—"the 'ole affair was a elegant success."

Cortiss was blatantly joyous. The squabbles and the coarse talk and jokes were a full meal to the man who knew London streets better than the home paddocks of Mindoorie. He drew together a cricket-team of sorts, and harried it through the long hot twilight. For all the world over are men

who will work like men and play like children when the day's task is done.

Rabbit-skinner lay on the grass and watched. A crowd were at pitch-and-toss to the rightward, and others wrangled over cards in the sweltering wharè.

The reek of rank tobacco smoke, and perspiration, and sheep was everywhere, and some of the jokes made his ears flame.

Walt sauntered along the frontage, and Rabbit-skinner made himself small behind a battered pannikin. But the big man saw him and came over, looking down with immovable face.

"You needn't turn out in th' morn'n'," he said. "Go up 'n git yer pay arter breakfas', 'n then yer c'n clear."

Rabbit-skinner went white to his lips. Partly, he was sick with hunger, for he had not eaten in the man-choked living-wharè.

"Oh, please," he faltered. "Please—sir."

Walt's lids drooped lower over the keen eyes. Then he spread himself on the grass beside the boy.

"What 'd yer run fr'm home fur?" he asked.

"I—got sick of it."

There was no attempt at denial. Walt grinned a little.

"Like this life better?"

"No."

"Go back, then."

"No."

"Any reasons?"

"I'm not a funk," said the boy hotly. "I've got to learn to be a man—I'm old enough."

Walt smoked in silence. From the cricket-pitch came the voice of Clint.

"I won't go out. Tell yer I shan't go out till I made a run. 'Tain't law. Hook it, Puddy. Oh, all right, my pet. There you are, then—and that too."

The bat was exactly timed to match. Puddy said several things, and the cricket-team resolved presently into a football scrimmage. Later, Clint emerged, with the bat rammed in the front of his shirt, and returned unabashed to the crease. The whole assembly went to clapping with verbal accompaniment, and Walt beat his toes on the hard earth, shouting—

"Good fur you, old chap. Don't yer let that crowd bounce yer."

Then he looked at the boy.

"'Man' is a big term. Yer c'n be like one 'r two o' them in there,"—he nodded back at the whare,—"'r yer c'n be a real white man like little Clint. But we start at the bottom out here. Take what yer think yer c'n do. Git a cowboy's billet 'r suthin'."

"I had that at home. It's a silly game. I'd much sooner shear—I could learn."

"Thanky. But yer won't learn on our ship. Git some skins fr'm a slaughter-yard 'n practise on them." Then he spoke wise, god-fatherly words to Rabbit-skinner for five long minutes, lay down again, and let them soak in.

There was a first-saloon disagreement among the pitch-and-toss players. "I tell you," came a voice, high-pitched and very clear, "it is a double-headed penny, you distinctive——"

"'E never could see a joke," said the offender mournfully; and then Harry Morel struck in with angry retaliation. Walt frowned.

"Harry 'll git chipped 'fore very long," he muttered. "Well, young 'un?"

Rabbit-skinner arose with a long sigh.

"I'll try it," he said. "But I thought—I wanted to be a man, straight off."

Walt looked introspectively on a part of the round world as he knew it.

"An' yer 'll hev no need ter be extry proud o' yerself when yer are," he answered.

A LITTLE MATTER OF LAW.

“Might rules the world, and right rules might—
So in our youth we learn it;
But craft rules both, you’ll find, if you
Have wit that can discern it.”

The Drover’s Creed.

THE sun sat up in a flat brassy sky, and flayed the bare hills where the dried tussock rubbed off in dust. There was a road at the hill-foot, flint-white and so long that it tapped all Nelson and Marlborough—yea, and the very heart of North Canterbury also. The sea flanked it to the near-side, bringing slow waves—sick with the heat—to fall on an empty shore of shingle that burnt to the touch.

A mob of sheep some two thousand weak crawled on the road, and gave up to the cruel day that weary, toneless crying that goes to the heart of a drover; for it means starvation, and drought, and endless deaths; and pity which troubles a man by day and by night, and is of no avail.

Condy’s nerves were raw with the sound of it, and — this being the tenth noon of unutterable heat—he was possessed by soul and body ache in addition. And when the nerves of a man stand on

edge the world seems a more evil place than it really is, and the term of our miseries tot up infinitely greater than the term of our mercies.

But, without any doubt whatsoever, this was a terrible thing that had caught them between the bone-dry earth and sky. It was Lane who had sent Condry and Harry Morel into the north for merinos that his flocks upon the Southland hills should get increase. And it was the drought that fought with Lane's desire, laying this burden of suffering on man and animal by long grey road, and naked river-bed, and barren, dusty hills.

Condry pulled across the track to Harry Morel. He was hating Harry just then because that Harry could whistle through all the hours with unbroken cheerfulness, and sing when his lips grew too parched to make sound.

"What are we going to do, Harry? What are we going to *do*? It fair gets me down to see the poor brutes dying like flies this way. I'm blest if we'll land Lane one out of the whole bally lot. 'Must have lost about twenty already to-day."

"More. Twenty since we passed Sefton." Harry kept careful tally of the many that had fallen by the roadway. "Yes; this is a corker, right enough. 'Don't fancy the priests could teach us much about Purgatory now——" His horse pitched on its knees over a struggling body that made complaint in the dust and was dead on the instant.

"Twenty-six." Harry came to his feet, and

felt round for his sheath-knife. "We're getting on. Lane 'll make a pile out of the skins."

He fell to work, ripping off the hide with rapid, skilful hands, and Condy rode back for the tip-dray and the old lagging horse that slept through the empty hours as it followed the trail mechanically.

"They're mighty tough now." Harry jerked the body over and attacked the other side. "No flesh to pull against—don't believe they had a square meal for a month before we took delivery. I'll rag Lane for buying on the blind this way."

The cart was brimming with panting, piteous-eyed wethers that, possibly, might pull round by rest. Condy's mouth tightened as he looked on them.

"It's — devilish," he said. "We're simply driving them till they lie down and die."

"They'd do that anyhow."

"Which is no sort of comfort whatever. Look at 'em. By Jove! it hurts a chap's very soul to look at 'em!"

Harry straightened, and drew his shirt-sleeve across his face. It was streaked with dust and sweat, and drawn about the eyes from the road-glare. But there was a quick contraction of the pupils that made Condy sit up with a grunt of vague satisfaction. For this was Harry's battle-signal, and Harry came of the stock that would fight law, and justice, and sin with alike fierceness when the mood held him.

He did not speak as he flung the raw skin over the tail-board of the cart. And it was in a continued silence that he hooked his arm across the saddle-bow, and walked by his horse with the slow, easy step of the athlete.

Condy followed in reverence and some hope. For if it lay to the hand of man to wrench this thing from final disaster, it was Harry Morel would provide that hand.

The round hills changed to clay faces, shorn flat to the road, and the incoming sea wallowed in little rock-pools. There were times when dogs and men worked like demons to guard the mob from the salt wetness that would mean a maddened death. But they had filled themselves at a half-dried river some two miles back, and it was food that they cried for among the eternal dust.

Then Harry swerved alongside Condy, and his face was as a boy's for mischief.

"'Member that low swampy land o' Marshall's this side the Mason, Condy? Yes, of course you would. It was green as a leek when we came up. Sutton has got a nice little grazing gully past Porirua, but Marshall's is nearer. I'm going to put 'em in there, and give 'em a skinful. Marshall has made two fortunes already this year—got the only fat stock in Marlborough. He can afford to give us a bite."

"But he won't. It's worth its weight in gold to him, that block."

"Then I guess we won't ask him. Confound it,

there's another one down—dyin', too. Fetch along the cart, will you."

"It'll be trespass, of course," said Condy, hauling on the rein; and the buckle was hot in his hand.

"Undoubtedly. An' a month hard, without the option of a fine if we get nabbed. Marshall's a big-wig, and he hasn't got a particularly chivalrous soul. Are you game to chance it?"

Condy laughed, shrugging his shoulders. He was clean-built, with a small head well set on his body, and eyes that looked the world straightly.

"You bet," he said. "It won't hurt Marshall, and it'll be the salvation of the sheep."

"It won't hurt Marshall, as you justly observe. Much more likely to hurt us if we can't engineer the thing to look like an accident."

"There are only five wires and a barb round it," said Condy hopefully. "Rotten sort o' fence these times. A starving mob 'd just walk through it 'fore we could stop 'em."

Harry grunted. There were occasions when he pitied Condy.

"Don't you know that every blessed little settler in the district has fed this road to his sheep till they've swallowed all but the bones of the hills and the dust? And do you think that those same sheep 'd have walked past Marshall's land with only a five-wire up? Go and cool your head in the sea, old man. Your brain's gone pulpy."

"It doesn't cool it. I've tried six times already. What do you think, then?"

"If Marshall has got wire netting," said Harry, "we're flummoxed—unless we can root under it, or find a gate. If he has any other sort of a fence we'll get 'em through it somehow. Well?"

"It's illegal, to put it mildly. And we'll get into a swingeing row."

Harry waved the bitten-down stem of his pipe to the stumbling, crying things that filled the roadway, and Condyl, accepting the mute argument, fell silent. And he did not marvel, although Harry was known on Mindoorie as a man hard as flint to his fellow-men, and one without compassion and without fear. For—and this is purely a matter of birth and breeding—a colonial will very often do for animals that which he will deny his kind. Because, in seven cases out of nine, his life belongs to sheep, or cattle, or horses, and he serves them all his days.

The air was dead in the dust of the track, and dead over the faded sea and the low tumbled hills that drew the heat closer when the way twisted inland among them.

Harry whistled "The flowers o' the forest," with a clear, birdy wistfulness that made Condyl homesick for his south land; and slowly they followed the trail past silent tussock and grey manuka. Up a steep grade, where Condyl thrice took his turn with the sheath-knife, along a cutting, and over a lifeless creek. Then—as the pulse quivers suddenly through the length of a boat when her engines are waked—so a quiver flickered through the mob; for it smelt the

green English grass on Marshall's flats round the corner.

The weaker ones fell out; but the bulk pushed forward with a new note in the rising wave of sound. They were pouring downhill as milk pours from a cup when Harry rounded the point and saw the rich swampland where Marshall's sheep moved. It looked like a billiard-table with the white balls in play; and Condy was swearing under his breath as they came to the boundary.

It was a viciously strained ten-wire, with close standards; and every other wire was a barb. Condy, who had prayed for slotted droppers, collapsed in the saddle.

"It's no go," he said. "We can't push those aside, and we can't grub 'em. The brutal things are tight as violin strings. Besides—well?"

Harry had descended, and loped some hundred yards along the line. He came back on the inside to escape the torrent of woolly bodies that would undoubtedly have laid flat any ordinary fence.

"Blest if I know," he said, and bit on his thumb-nail.

The sheep strained, flinging themselves against the wires that stood like granite, and Condy slid from the saddle, attempting to shake them in his wrath.

"They're as hard as the devil's elbow. What is it now?"

Harry stooped at his side, lifted a struggling wether that—after the manner of a sheep—kicked him in the going, and cast it over into the green.

It's frightened "ba-a" broke short as its teeth clenched in the grass, and Condy flung over another before he knew it. Then sense awoke, and he knocked up Harry's hand.

"Don't! Harry, you ass—how are we going to get them back?"

"We'll get 'em back all right. Go in and demand 'em, perhaps—and pull Marshall if he refuses to fork them out. They're carrying Hunt's brand, and sheep-stealing is a punishable offence. You leave that to me. I'll fix it."

"Bub—but we can't chuck over the whole bally two thousand."

Harry giggled until Condy was very entirely savage. And before he answered he tipped three more lean-ribbed bodies into paradise. Then he took breath, holding to the fence.

"No, I don't reckon we can — and I'm not going to try. I think about fifty will be enough. Come on, and put your back into it. There'll be developments presently."

Condy did not doubt this in the least. But he worked up to the collar without comment, until the sweat dropped off him and his legs shook with exhaustion. For (and it is only the men with the knack who can do it at all) sheep-lumping appeals to every muscle and fibre in the body, and absorbs in five minutes the stock of breath that would ordinarily last a full day.

Condy flung over twenty-three, that lay in the grass and apparently took it in through their skins. But the pauses between each effort were

longer, and suddenly he sat in the dust, with the earth galloping past in red whirligigs.

"Done, are you?" said Harry. "So am I, pretty near. This brute 'll have to be the last."

He grunted as it caught him in the chest with a hind-leg. But he jumped the fence and ran among the fifty-odd that fattened on Marshall's feed, working them with cunning across to Marshall's sheep, that lay in the high cocksfoot and flax. Then he came back, comparatively undistressed.

"That's pretty well boxed 'em. And they're doing their little best to improve matters. Developments are beginning. Lick along back over the hill."

"Can't." Condy lay flat, and battled with that particular kind of sea-sickness which overtakes a man who has exerted himself beyond his strength. And the barking of dogs on the far side of the marshes did not interest him at all.

But Harry brought his own dogs to heel sternly, dragged Condy across his saddle, and towed horse and man over the dip, and round the corner. The tip-dray stood in the blocked tail of the mob, and far below, the forefront surged back and forth, and wept without ceasing.

Presently Condy sat up, and said, "What ratty idea have you got now, Harry?"

Harry had his ears cocked, and on his face was an absolute content.

"'Ever laid poisoned carcasses to catch gulls?"

"Of course; often. But I don't see——"

"You will directly—wait till I get my breath. That last sprint has blown me properly. Well, we've laid our carcasses, and—there was a man working that dog, you know—and I think we'll land our gull very presently. If it doesn't happen to be a gull, perhaps we'll get had. But there are eighteen chances to three that it will be a gull."

"You mean that a shepherd will come over and walk into us for letting our sheep in?"

"Exactly. I fancy he's coming now. Sounds eager, too, doesn't he?"

Up through the motionless air came the raving of a man, mixed with bark of dogs and fretful complaint of sheep.

"Ye-es," said Condy dubiously. "That's not very funny for us, is it?"

"Don't know yet. We're going to find out. Will you get into the saddle, man?"

They rode down with the sleepy, stooping sway of body that is peculiar to the drover, and a man in the paddock wheeled his horse to them, and came up headlong. This man was a town cadet. Harry knew when he saw him handle his stock-whip (which is not the correct thing for sheep-country, in any case). Also, the expressions that he used to his dogs were uncanonical.

"It's going to be better than I hoped. Now, Condy, you see me talk to him. And dress by—no; I think you'd best let me do the gassing. You just look all the kinds of fool you can. I might want you to be one, soon."

"If you're not the most incontinent ass—what can we expect to get out of it, anyway?"

"You follow your leader, and shut up. Watch me frighten the soul out of him."

It was a very raw cadet, and young enough to trip on its own pride.

"What the deuce are your sheep doin' in our grass? It's trespass, I tell you! Take them out! Take them out, instantly!"

Harry roused sleepily as the cadet sawed his horse's head high in the air, bringing it alongside with a jangle of wire.

"What? Who's trespassing? No, no, young feller; this is a public road. You don't come over me that way."

The cadet foamed.

"Your sheep are in here," he explained loudly. "In this private property—eating our grass—lots of them. Take them away. Confound you! will you take them away?"

Harry swung in a breath into the keen, hard man of biting tongue that half his mates feared and hated.

"Our sheep in your grass? What the devil d'you mean? *Our* sheep? Who's your boss?"

"Marshall. He——"

"And what the devil does Marshall mean by stealing our sheep? Because we can't keep a man in front, and a man behind, and a troop of men on each side, are our sheep not to be safe on the public highway? How many has Marshall

got? Look here; you anti them up, at once. At once, d'you hear!"

"Blast your cheek! Do you think we want your confounded sheep? They're eating our——"

"How many has he got? Don't swear at me like that, for I won't stand it. How many has he got?"

"I—don't—know." The cadet was becoming explosive. "Come an' take 'em away."

"What did Marshall steal them for? Hasn't he got enough of his own?"

Condy cast one eye-blink at the man beyond the fence, put his head down, and sniggered. But Harry sat erect on the old brown mare, and not a muscle of his dark face quivered.

"Will you give me my sheep?" he said; for the other fought helplessly for words. "You've delayed me half an hour already, and I'm in a hurry. What did Marshall steal them for?"

"He—didn't—steal—them. They—they must have got in." The cadet was losing his head before this steady persistence.

"Oh, gaps! That's an old game. Gaps in the fence to decoy sheep. Marshall's a downy bird. How many different brands has he got on that flock? Better not try that game too often, or you'll get into trouble. Where are your gaps?"

The cadet had helped in the construction of this fence, and he knew it to be absolutely perfect and sheep-proof. Besides, Harry's speech was direct insult.

"There isn't a gap in the whole of it, you fool. What 'd we want to feed every starving mob that comes along for? They can't have got in that way."

"How did they get in, then? You say Marshall didn't steal them? Of course there are gaps. But if you don't know your fence well enough to find them, I'm not going to help you. You've got gates, I suppose? I want to get my sheep."

"Gates are locked," said the other sulkily.

"Oh. And you're not allowed a key, of course. Why does Marshall put little boys in these positions? They only mess things up!"

The cadet had a key; it opened all the padlocks on the run. But nothing under heaven was supposed to open the road-gates this season.

"I have a key," he said savagely, and fished it out of his trouser-pocket.

"'Key of your money-box?' suggested Harry blandly.

"Come and get your bally sheep," said the boy in his throat, and he was dead-white with rage. "There's a gate up here."

"Why couldn't you say so, then? I suppose they walked in through that. Condy, bring the mob along, and I'll catch up afterwards. Can't afford to waste the whole day over this foolery."

It was just for an instant that Harry's left eyelid quivered, but that instant was enough. Condy understood, and gasped with the immensity

of the idea. He got the weak, desperate brutes under way with difficulty, and drove them gatewards, the while Harry tickled his victim into a blind anger that made him fumble over the double locks and chains, and finally drop his key in the dust. While he sought it Harry noted that the hinges were faced, and the gate of iron. Without doubt, Marshall was a careful man. And—equally without doubt—Marshall's cadet never learnt his language from books.

It was by special direction of Providence that the gate—opening outwards—should swing from the sheep that swept down to it. The situation had developed of itself, and when the last lock and twist of chain were down Harry had no more to do but back his mare clumsily into the way, and jam the loose-hung gate in the ridge of the road.

“Look out, you —— !” The boy pitched from his saddle, and dashed through to wrench the grating iron free. But as his back turned the first little dribble flowed up, and over the tread of the gate. Before Harry could take breath twice, the dribble was a resistless stream that pressed, and lifted, and went in, wave upon rising wave, with sound like the rushing of a mighty sea. Condy had timed his attack to a nicety.

The cadet was nearly knocked off his feet by the flux, and it would have been piteous if it had not been so funny, to see his puny muscles trying to close the gate against two thousand famished sheep that smelt food.

He was a very young cadet, and for an instant Harry felt sorry for him. Then he struck at Harry with the butt of his whip, and there was a foul word on his mouth. Harry's left arm shot out before he reached the ground. But there was no force behind the blow, for swifter than thought came the knowledge that the termination of this act was now simplicity itself.

The cadet knew more about boxing, but he was too desirous to kill Harry. This upset the science, and he sobbed with wrath, and pain, and trouble when Harry heaved him out of the dust among the ebbing dregs of the army that had spread to the right and the left and the full centre across Marshall's flats.

"You'd better hunt up your men, young 'un," he said, "and begin to think about drafting. My brand is two diamonds in a square."

Condy explained later on Mindoorie that Harry was clearly without bowels of compassion, and that the cadet's face when the matter was presented to Marshall troubled his dreams yet. Harry grinned slowly, beating a soft tattoo on the tablecloth with a teaspoon.

"If that kid hadn't lost his temper he might have blocked us even then. If Marshall hadn't got the bulk of his flock on those marshes we mightn't have drafted our little lot with four days' good feed sticking to their ribs, and the heart to carry them into better country. And if either of 'em ever find out how our sheep got into their grass before the gates were opened, I'll eat my

oilskins. 'Bet they're still hunting for that gap."

"It saved the mob," said Condy reflectively. "But—it was illegal." And this time there was derision in Harry's grin.

FROM HEADQUARTERS.

“Ven dat dot dog die, he vas dead. Ven dat I die I haf to go to punishment yet. Ya; a man has mooch prides pecause dot he is a Soul.”—*Hans's Private Biography.*

“**L**OOKS more 'n a bit like Joe Parnham's dawg,” said Cortiss.

Sheehan reined up beside him, and both regarded critically the mob of some fifty sheep in the dried creek bottom, and the brindle collie that held them.

“Joe's,” said Sheehan; “Joe's. An' bin here all day, I should reckon. If you want to git considerable chawed, Cortiss, you'll try to move 'em.”

Cortiss executed a flank movement, patted the dog, and walked slowly backward with words of enticement. The dog moved one muscle of his eyelid in delicate contempt, and continued to sit on his tail.

“Ain't got no time to spare fur or'nary men,” interpreted Sheehan. “Has to look after Joe's work an' his own too.”

“Hand 'e'll 'ave ter look arter Joe superadded d'reckly.” Cortiss nodded at the little hotel

across the creek. "Seepose Joe's havin' a wet. Immoral hold man."

"There's a pro. order out agin him." Sheehan put his colt into a walk. "Took it out hisself down in Mitchell he did—an' then he comes in here. That's his hoss tied to the fuchsia."

Cortiss' hack stopped of its own unaided effort at the verandah. Cortiss swung his leg over.

"We must go in an' 'aul Joe hout," he said virtuously. "'E's drinkin' 'isself inter trouble. That's what 'e's doin'."

"An' his dog 'll likely go to sleep an' slip up the sheep," added Sheehan.

They sought Joe in the bar, and told him their fears. Joe's eyes were moist to begin with. They ran tears as he thanked them.

"You're gennlemen," he said. "Rele gennlemen. If you're thinkin' o' drinks, Cortiss, an' likes ter remember a old friend——"

Cortiss remembered the old friend. Then he and Sheehan remembered each other. Then Cortiss climbed on the bar and began.

"They're talkin' o' reduction down in Mitchell," he said casually.

"If it was prohibition,"—Joe's voice pitched in a high key, and sank two octaves,—"I'd vote. If you was prohibition I'd vote for you. If that chandecleer swinging up there was. pro——"

"You'd bunk," said Sheehan. "You takes out a order, an'—you bunks from it. Knowin' it holds here, too. Don't you know it holds here, Taps?"

"We wasn't served with no notice," said the barman, and Joe chuckled.

"'Course not. Nobody minds. I t-took out order, an' never will I lay inflammation 'gin meself. 'Think I lay inflammation 'gin meself? N-not Joe."

"You're tryin' your possible," remarked Cortiss critically. "Look at your nose, old beet, hand your heyes likewise."

Joe appeared to attempt it. Then he wept because it was not so easy as it sounded.

"Nuthin's easy 's it sounds. I take out order. No more drink, no more—'n thish place here all time. So s'prised—I will punch your head, Sheehan, 'f you laugh 't me tellin' truth."

He hit where Sheehan was not, and shook his head.

"Not near so easy 't soun's," he murmured. "Simple thing—take orders—re-tire in ech'lon—'n thash all."

Cortiss and Sheehan kicked him impatiently.

"Oh, will you wake up?" they said. "What are you going to do with your sheep? No man on earth can move them from that dog except yourself, and they will starve in the creek."

"If you will give me some arms,"—Joe opened his eyes, and spoke in the terribly distinct tones of the half-drunk,—“I will go and tell them. I want six arms, an' shoulder 'rrms—present——”

Joe had been in some line regiment once. Report—fathered by himself—ran that he had been colonel. When in this case he answered with all

his powers to private. Cortiss and Sheehan used the test now, and he straightened under it for one grand minute.

"Advance!" he thundered "At th' double. Give 'em the pint, boys. Pint o' two-'n half." He collapsed into Sheehan's arms. "Drinkin' 'emselfs into cells by half-comp'nies," he murmured. "'Appy beggars."

"'Ere are your sheep," cried Cortiss, shaking him. "Speak up. Bring 'em out."

"Wi' th' gun-butt," said Joe suddenly; "meanin', o' course, the bun-gut, you c'n send a Fuzzy—where can you send 'r Fuzzy, C'r'ish?"

"I d'n' know. Pound, per'aps. Or the wash. Will you tell——"

Joe wept anew.

"You do'n nunderstan'," he said. "It's not sho easy as it soun's. Whash thish?"

"On'y your dog. Look to 'im, Dan. Bet 'e knows what's wrong wi' Joe."

The dog stood up with his grave brown eyes on his master. But each muscle was alert to arrest movement in his charge. Joe sighed.

"Think you're takin' too much 'n yourselfs," he said, with dignity. "An' if you'd take your thumbs off my eyes, likewise—well? Why didn't you do't 'fore?"

He shook them off, stood alone for just so long as it took to say three decisive sentences. Then the dog took charge, and Joe sat on the stones.

"'Call your 'pert'nence chronic," he remarked.

"Thash it. Chronic. 'F I feed my sheep 'n creeks — why d' I feed my sheep on creeks, Cortish?"

"What a happy old c'nundrum it is," said Sheehan. "Joe, git up an' bring your dog to a full stop, or he'll take them home."

"I haven't got a home," cried Joe, loudly weeping. "Shall I tell you why I haven't got a home, Cortiss? Shall I tell you why I haven't got a home, Sh——?"

"Stop your dog first. Stop him. Can you whistle?"

"With a mouth like th' inside o' a four-pint-sevin arter heavy firin'." Joe was majestically dignified. "I don't see how can 'spect to have a mouth like a four—— Shall I tell you why I haven't got a home?"

"Let him," said Sheehan. "The mob is investigatin' on its pertickler own. Pore brutes. Keen set, they are."

They ran over the rank grass six hundred yards beyond, and the brindled one had them in hand, with just one glance in the minute at the three in the creek bottom. The sun had no warmth in it, and Joe shivered as he sat with his head in his hands.

"I wash goin' t' tell you suthin' 't happed to my comp'ny," he said. "But you intr'pted. Did you never learn no manners, you two recruities? Sh'll I tell you why I haven't got home?"

"Yes," said Cortiss. "We're dyin' to know. Go on, old cock."

Joe pointed with unsteady foot at the little hotel behind the manuka. His hands were otherwise occupied.

"That's why. Thash why, ev-ery time. I'd vote pro-bish'n—if that hole in Cortishes elber wash pro'bish'n I'd vote for 't. Thash why I'd be a rich man to-day; I'd be drivin' me own car-ri'ge, an'— How many hosses drive a carri'ge, Cortiss?"

"There he is agin," muttered Sheehan. But Cortiss answered—

"Some drives a pair. Guess a happple 'd be as much as you'd manage, hold feather-pillar, hand then it 'd kick you hout."

"If that apple was prohibition," said Joe distinctly, "I'd vote for it. Drink is th' curse o' country. What's a noo country want wi' drink? What's it want wi' me?"

"Give it up," said Cortiss. "We don't want no more wi' you, anyways; but I seeepose we'll hev to see you home. 'Believe 'e cud stick on 'is 'oss now, Dan, if we goed each side 'im. Hi, hold skippin'-rope, can you climb into a saddle?"

"I c'n climb into two," vociferated Joe accommodatingly, "two at onst. But it ain't so easy as it sounds."

They got him to horse between them, and took him back with the sheep. He lived in a wharè on wheels in the midst of his paddock, and he was quite fit to thank them when they bade him good-night. The dog stood with grave head under his hand as they looked back.

"That dog's a Crisshan," said Cortiss. "Sufferin' some shame now, I wouldn't wonder. Did you ever 'ear sech a hold hass as to take out a order an' bunk from it?"

"Per'aps," remarked Sheehan profoundly, "per'aps ole Joe don't find obeyin' orders so easy as it sounds"

IN THE FARTHEST SEA.

“ I held my hand for my one love’s sake
That never was love to me ;
But the spring of a life is easy to break,
And easy to fell, the tree.

Set up the tree that was cast last year ;
Put youth to the tirèd brain ;
But I’ll have no toys that a man holds dear,
Nor meet with my love again.”

Over the Border.

HARRY MOREL carried a sick heart through all his days, as many another has done, and will do. This is a thing beyond human help ; but each man has one choice given at the beginning. He can face his trouble, and make no sign ; or he can fall, and allow it to wreck his life.

Harry’s life was wrecked, and the fault was partly Tregarron’s. Tregarron’s wife came into it too. But she was dead long since, and for Harry was left a shut door—and more pain than a man bears well in his youth. After the first Harry bore it particularly badly, and then the men who had known him did not take his name in their mouths any more.

So much of the story is past and paid for. The

rest belongs to one little hour of a sunny morning on the Bountys.

The Bounty Islands lie very nearly in latitude 48° south by longitude 179° west, and they are quite the bleakest land on God's earth. They are granite; brown, greasy granite, grooved through the centuries by generation and generation of passing seals and penguins. They are barren; they are accursed; and their name is the grimmest joke on the school maps.

Once in many years a timber tramp or a whaler goes to pieces among the twenty odd rocks and islets, and then all the sea-birds of the Antarctic fatten and fight in the wreckage. But, taking the straight months as they run, it is only the bi-yearly Government steamer fetching a compass round all the southern groups that ever picks up the Bountys where they sit, naked and uncaring, in their naked sea.

The skipper of the Government steamer had known Harry in the old days. They had sailed together on other seas; and when life was not well with Harry on land, the Old Man received him, and asked no questions. He was down on the books as greaser, as fireman, as cook. The year he met Tregarron again he shipped as fourth mate, and he never went after that. The Old Man would have signed him on as belaying-pin or a cleet with equal compliance; for he had trodden a winepress of his own in his time, and he knew that the smart of the juice is on the soul for always.

The boat cleared from the Bluff one nightfall, heading due south for the open sea, and leaping in all her timbers to the pulse of the long live rollers. Clear away on horizon sea and sky kissed, red-lipped. Between, the water ran rust-brown with the whale food, and icebergs, unsubstantial as half-formed thoughts, made a city in the farthest gloaming.

Of the two men on the bridge, one was known through the service as an upright man and a careful sailor. The other was known through New Zealand as drunkard, card-sharper, and worse beside. But the Old Man's wind-driven little eyes twinkled amiably as he jerked his pipe-stem to the tumbling distance.

"Seems rum thinking there's no one to meet us in the land we're going to," he said. "Eight years I've drawn these islands, and never sighted so much as a dead man's clothes. Queer little cog in the world's machinery this, ain't it?"

"Better luck this time, perhaps," said Harry absently. He braced up to the strong brine wind, and the unsatisfied trouble lessened in his eyes. "There's that ketch missing from out——"

"Ketch be fiddled! with the tides at this set! Look now, and I'll tell you——"

The Old Man's stories had the salt of life and the sting of truth. Harry leaned on the rail, and listened; and burnt the old live passions again in his pipe-bowl, while the land passed away and the world was just a brimming teacup set in the universe.

"Yes," he said presently, when the Old Man spoke of one they both had known. "I suppose that's what killed him, poor devil. But of course he wouldn't talk about it. Getting cold, isn't it?"

Then he went below to clean out the first mate at poker.

He took part in the landing through the bull-kelp of Auckland Island. He potted sea-lions on Enderby, and agreed with the boatswain who swore into the ravished magazine of the depôt there, saying, "Them triple-plated whalers 'ud steal the heye out of a triple-plated sail-needle." But the idle days were not good medicine this time, and revolver-practice lost charm long before the *Bougong* laid to off the Bountys, and began to patch up the depôt. It was burst all ways by the wind.

Harry borrowed the gig on the second morning, and rowed under the ramp of great blank cliffs, and up the jagged waterways, and through smooth landlocked channels where mild fur-seals sprawled on the water's edge in the sun. On the ledge of a cliff to leeward something glittered, four-square. Harry pulled across, ran out the anchor, and went up the scarped rock by the sheer strength of his fingers.

It was awkward climbing, for the granite was level as glass and polished as some far-away old oak balusters where he used to wear out his school-boy clothes. On the first ledge he slipped his boots, and slung them to his neck by the laces. Then doggedness, and a certain desire for this

thing that had now gone out of sight overhead, drew him up, with curling toes and crooked fingers that sought for every crevice, and lost skin in the finding.

A king penguin started from a hummock and ran athwart him, talking like a set alarum-clock with the bell off. It ran with its body sheer upright, and its ridiculous little feet pattering and sliding on the greasy going.

Harry paused, taking breath and shaking the sweat from his hands. There was just the sleepy cluck of the waves below, and the broad white light of the sun above. And nothing else but the hot shining rocks, until an angry molly-hawk scattered from somewhere a half-made nest of guano and quills on his head, and he could not find a stone to throw at her.

He swung himself over the next ledge, walked three steps, and picked up the shining thing whereby hung a man's life. For it was an unworn match-box, struck by J. Bell & Co., Wellington, and it had four good matches in it. Also it was distinctly hot to the touch.

Harry sat, filled his pipe, and lit it. The flame spurted blue on the warm air, and through it half the Bountys quivered in haze, where they lay, unclean growths, on the body of the sea.

Each one was foul with guano, bleak, liver-coloured, and hopelessly barren. The waves beat them angrily, and Harry heard them answering out of the slow silence.

"Life is solid and lasting as the wind-spray.

Death is immortal. We are Death. We are Desolation. We are Derision."

The grey-brown seals slept on the flat brown-grey rocks. The penguins came singly in from the sea, and wore their part in the thousand-year track to the nearest rookery. The molly-hawks dipped and called through the spray far below. All their red eager life was such a little, little thing pitted to the strong death of one brown rock. Harry got up, and slid by clumsy ways down to the farther sea.

"Brutal place," he said; and beyond the rookery his eyes blinked on a young feather of smoke.

It thrilled him one instant.

"By Jove!" he said, and stumbled quickly over the stamped guano bottom where the penguins sat shoulder to shoulder. "Shouldn't wonder if the man who made that was rather pleased to see me."

The feather blew out of a dip in the eternal glazed almond-toffee of the rock. Its beginning was a feeble blaze of driftwood and kelp and seal scraps that spread a filthy stench to the hot air. A man crouched beside the fire, tending it jealously. And the man was Tregarron. His bloated face sagged at the jaws, and his eyes were sunken. But in all other respects he was the same Tregarron.

He rose from his knees, stretching for a piece of seal-meat laid on a rock; saw Harry, and dropped back, staring, and saying "Thank the Lord" many times over. Tregarron did not usually take that Name in his mouth for prayer.

It made Harry laugh now, for he discovered that he had come all across the seas to pay Tregarron for certain wrongs done to a woman now dead.

"Give me something to eat," demanded Tregarron then. "Bread—biscuit—anything of that sort—quick."

Harry turned out his pockets, finding two ship's biscuits and the part of a third. The other man snatched, and bit at them ravenously; stooping twice to drink from a warm rain-water hollow beside his foot.

It struck Harry as very funny that Tregarron should think of his appetite with all that was going to be between them. He sat on a granite boulder and waited; and presently Tregarron stood up, speaking as a man suddenly awakened.

"I'm afraid I've been rather rude, haven't I? But if you knew what it was to eat flesh, flesh, only flesh, till you loathe the feel of it between your teeth, and fancy it's turning you into a brute beast——"

"It wouldn't do that," said Harry politely. But his voice was curiously even.

Tregarron did not recognise the under-word.

"I'd have gone mad," he cried. "I'd have gone mad if you hadn't come. There is the boat always, you know. We took the second boat when the ketch foundered; and she split on that tongue that runs there—and the bodies came round for days." He was beginning to shake, and Harry watched him rather closely. "There was one—I

think he was a mate by his clothes; he hadn't got any face to speak of—and I tried to land him and strip him. But he just bobbed and bobbed, and went away again. And there was another of 'em bobbing out in the surf. And the birds yell as the men yelled when they were drowning—it makes me sick——” His voice stammered to silence, and Harry said sweetly——

“It's as well we know there is no such thing as retributive justice, isn't it? Otherwise, one might think——” The pause was completely suggestive.

Tregarron's face altered to a new fear.

“Oh, you brute!” he said. “You brute!”

He slipped quick bare toes into rock crannies, and began to swarm up the six feet of granite. But the trigger of the Colt in Harry's hand clicked out all the necessary warning, and Tregarron slewed round. Then he pasted himself to the rock so far as was possible, and shook like a man in an ague.

“You any good at pot-shooting, Tregarron?” Harry was playing with the thing most carelessly. “I'm rather fair myself at anything up to sixty, flying or—running.”

Tregarron moistened his lips, but no sound came from them. His face looked very ugly, twisted over his shoulder like that.

“Better come down, I think, hadn't you?”

Tregarron dropped, squirming, and sought for speech on the ground.

Harry was lightly built, and much of his nerve was gone through hard living. But he looked

quite as deadly and as swift as the small bright thing in the palm of his hand. Tregarron lifted his eyes from the tense shadow lying ink-dark across his feet. Then he straightened with a mighty effort.

"Go on, and get it over if you are coward enough," he said.

Harry laughed—a very little.

"Knowing me as you do, that is not so plucky after all. When did I ever hit a man—or a woman—who couldn't hit back? Perhaps if I had had a wife—as some men have—and the wise provision of the law to back me—I might have struck her—and put fear into her—and insulted her under all conditions that the devil could suggest—always within the law—until she died of—bronchitis, wasn't it? Perhaps I might have done all that—to a wife."

He was still handling the Colt with light fingers, and his words ran out soft and very distinct. But he took his breath like a man in a punishing fight.

Tregarron's lip lifted above his teeth.

"Perhaps you might," he said, "if there had been another man."

"Take that back! Take it back, you liar, or I'll put a bullet through you this instant. Well? Speak! You know she was true."

"Not your fault, then," snarled Tregarron.

Harry leaned his hand heavily on the rock, and his eyes looked away past Tregarron.

"My sin only," he said, as though speaking

to a higher tribunal. "But I never told her. Never!"

There was pain enough in the man's voice if Tregarron could have heard it. But in the blatant conceit of other days he strutted, unmindful of his raggedness, and saying one thing that touched Harry to red wrath.

"And did you not know why I never cut you into strips that day? My God! You did, though! As you knew too why I cleared out and left you to—kill her. I had some care for her name, if you hadn't. You! You, who did it all!"

It was not a nice story that stood between these two men. For Tregarron was not a nice man, and it was he himself who had first coupled his wife's name with that of Harry Morel. Harry had heard of it at the club, and straightway fled to his diggings to load all his available ironmongery, and to sob in his boyish rage and shame when Polhill came in to show him the only way of escape.

"Of course everyone knows that Tregarron is blind-jealous of his wife," he said. "And he is quite the completest brute the devil ever turned out. I don't know what you've been doing, Harry——"

"I swear she is the purest——"

"Do you think there is any need for that, you young donkey? But all the world doesn't know her personally as we do, and—perhaps he loves her in his own swinish way. But that's not your business. Your business is to bunk clean off the reel, and so stop Tregarron from advertising his

family jars on wholesale lines. That is—if you have any regard for Mrs. Tregarron.”

This last was unnecessary after all that Polhill had just seen. But Harry did the one quite honourable action of his life, and went away that night. Later, when he had dropped many rungs down the ladder, he heard how she had died. Then he sought Tregarron, and did not find him.

Tregarron stood up, and answered him now in sulky defiance.

“A husband has some rights, I suppose. And she loved you first; yes, and last too, damn you! I'll swear she told you so often enough.”

“Never,” said Harry, behind his teeth. “She never told me. I never knew. All this time I never knew. A-h-h! If I'd known! Oh God! if I'd known——”

It was the cry of the man for the mate that was meant to be his since time began; for the loss that had given him an empty heart to carry into eternity. He stared, unseeing, over the mighty unrest of water that was so troubled beneath the calm of heaven, and Tregarron took spirit to crawl away after the fashion of a great unwieldy slug.

A seal nosed its young one carefully down a rock-slope, and rolled in where white spume followed the double splash. Two molly-hawks fought all across the eye-range like feather-dusters possessed, and in the rookery the penguins pattered busily, throwing squat black shadows in the strong light.

But Harry was drawing a woman's face back to

him across the years. His mouth and eyes were marvellously tender, and outward sound and sense had dropped from him.

A little blue crab nipped Tregarron's toe, and he yelled, incautiously. Then he yelled again. For the nose of a revolver generally feels cold on the nape of a man's neck, though the bare rocks around be flaking with heat.

"No, you don't," said Harry blandly. "There's the little matter of my own honour to be answered for yet, you know. I didn't choose to settle it publicly, as you observed before; so we'll settle it here—now. Sorry I've only one shooter, but a penny will arrange that."

He spun the coin up, and put his foot on it where it rang again on the granite.

"Call for first shot. Have you got a pretty straight eye, Tregarron? It won't be very wise for you to miss. Go on. It's you to call."

Tregarron shook flaccidly, and his little eyes squinted with fear.

"I won't. I can't. It's murder. Let me go."

"You should be an authority on all kinds of murder, I grant you. But this is not quite the same thing. I'm giving you equal chances, you see. Only I don't think you can shoot me so dead but I'll have the throat out of you before I die, Tregarron."

"You utter coward! When I am weak from exposure——"

"You are no weaker than a woman. Will you call?"

"No, I won't. You've done me enough harm already."

"I may do you more in a minute. Will you call?"

"You took her love from me." Tregarron's voice was charged with a blind fury. "Not that I wanted it. She was too white and puny for my taste. But I kept her. You never saw her again. I took care of that. You never saw her again."

Harry spoke into a minute-long silence, and his tone was curiously flat.

"We will neither of us see her again—ever. But we will find out what one of us will see, directly. Is it heads?"

Then Tregarron collapsed in the fire-ashes, and hid his eyes, and grovelled. The facets of his signet-ring struck out long flashes as he moved his hands, and Harry remembered that the seal was a drawn sword, and the motto, "For God and mine honour." Tregarron's wife had worn one on her watch-chain.

"You'd better get up, and take it standing," he suggested. "For there will be no pull-back now, Tregarron."

The man on the ground began to pray uncouthly. Harry dragged him to his feet in savage disgust.

"I think you've forgotten your prayers overlong by the sound of them. Oh, you crawler! can't you stand up to me like a man?"

"Suppose—you won?" moaned Tregarron.

"There is that contingency, certainly," said Harry drily. Then he flung the revolver down.

“Come on, and we’ll fight for it, then. We’ll fight for the right to pick that up, and go pot-shooting with it. You have science, and I haven’t; and raw meat and a stinting of the stomach won’t have done your wind any harm. But I’m ready to take it this way if you prefer it. Stand up, there.”

Tregarron hesitated. Then his cheek stung with a vicious, open-handed slap.

“Will you answer to that, then?”

Tregarron answered with a roar and a whirling forward rush that locked his arms about Harry’s middle, and sent the two staggering round the rock basin drunkenly. Tregarron was the heavier man, of greater knowledge, and he was fighting for his life. But Harry was pure Berserker in his long-nourished hate and his loathing of the close touch and breath of the man who had been Her husband. There was not much room for science; for when Tregarron would have thrown the other, they came to the ground together, and rose again together; gasping, struggling, bruised, close fastened in dumb live fury. There were none to call time, and none to give applause, except always the penguins tailing in from the sea, and the slothful sleek seals that opened one eye, turned, and slept again. A knot of molly-hawks spilt, clutching and shrieking, into the surf, and through the hot, drowsy silence there seemed to come the mutter of the big ice loosing about the Pole.

Once before two men had fought with never a one of their breed to know, or give judgment on the

issue. Cain carried a brand on his brow for that; and the shadow of it fell across the ages to another man's forehead as he felt Tregarron's throat strain under his knee and the heel of the Colt warm in his hand.

Tregarron's eyes were tight shut against the death, and his face was very horrible to look at. But he was too spent for further effort. Harry's breath came hardly, and the rocks reeled right and left in the glare. He waited for them to swing level again, and a thought ran through his mind as a telegraph-ribbon runs. This was near to the close of the breeding season. Soon, very soon, the seals would go down into the sea, and the penguins would follow, and on all the Bounty Islands would be deep and speechless desolation, where a man might cry alone to the winds and the rain by day and week and month and year.

Harry rose lightly, springing back, and slipping the Colt in his pocket.

"Get up, man," he said. "I'm not going to kill you."

Then Tregarron took him about the feet, exactly as the thing is done in Eastern countries, and let loose a flood of fulsomeness to all ruling powers, including the quick death spat from the revolver barrel. It was not an elevating exhibition, and Harry kicked himself free with contempt.

"You'll have time to praise Heaven when I'm gone. We'll finish this first. You are such a brave man, Tregarron, that I don't know if you most fear life or death. But I am going to try

you with life. There will be a boat round again in about six months. She won't come nosing up these little channels, but if you can strike the depôt island by swimming, you'll probably get picked up. You have a choice of about thirteen, I think."

What Tregarron said in the next five minutes is not nice to remember. Harry took some payment for certain things borne therefrom. Then he answered one speech out of the tossed invective.

"Of course you can follow me up if you like, but I don't think you will. For if you do I'll shoot you. And I'll shoot straight. By —, I will!"

"I'll die," moaned Tregarron. "I'll go mad. I know I'll go mad."

"I hope not. I shouldn't like you to forget your mercies. Stand over there till I get out of this."

Tregarron rocked his body, sitting in an abject heap, and cursing in frightened whispers. On the height above Harry stopped, and tossed pipe, matches, and tobacco into the other man's lap.

"I used some of your matches just now," he said, and went on. But when the power to do any more good or evil was afterwards taken from him, he rather liked to remember this. It was his favourite cutty, too.

He brought back a little blue crab to the *Bougong*, and it straightway pinched blood from the Old Man's finger.

"That warn't worth knocking yourself into a

lather about," said the Old Man, shaking it overboard. "See anything else?"

Harry leaned on the taffrail where the water was beginning to talk at the vessel's side.

"Yes," he said. "I saw a couple of molly-hawks fighting like devils—or like men."

CORTISS' CHOIR PRACTICE.

“We will sing one song for the Old Kentucky home,
For the Old Kentucky home far away.”

Old Song.

IT was a painful and sentimental love of his native land that caused Cortiss to make of himself a public nuisance in the very beginning of November. It will be easily seen that he was a nuisance, because he retorted a choir fifteen strong from the Mindoorie boys, and exercised it every night, to the intense sorrow of the rest of the homestead.

Walt came from the out-station in Christmas week, when the day's work was done. A warm yellow night held the earth, and he heard sounds and saw things which he designated as horrible and dangerous. Clint sat with his back to the wharè wall, watching the muddle of men under the trees, and he gave explanation, pulling Walt down beside him.

“Jest some o' Cortisses unsanitary English ideas. They're goin' ter sing up to the house Crismus night, an' Lane 'll sledge 'em out beer an' terbaccer same 's is done in Cortisses ole country.”

“Will he?” Walt's keen eyes sifted the gloom.

"Will he? Sheehan, 'n Harry, 'n—— Lane has some perspirin's o' common sense ef yer don't hurry him. But it's a sweet little choir," raising his voice; "sweet pretty. Goin' t' git 'em nightie-gowns too, Cortiss?"

Two violins were tuning strengthfully; but Lavel heard, and turned with a snarl. Cortiss blocked him promptly.

"Drawed heasy as a chicken, you hare. Puh! A Henglishman 'as more savvy! Look 'ere, Walt, you take an' sling it hup. Where's your rev'ence, you himmoral beggar? Crismus means honly hextra beer to you, but it means more 'n that to a Henglishman."

Clint interpreted the ring in Cortiss' voice.

"Quod?" he asked. "Well, so it does mean that to us too, o' times. 'Specially wi' that un-edicated karosine stuff——" Walt protected his mate by intervention of a quick shoulder.

"Don't int'rup' him, Cortiss. He's merely reminiscencin'. Git along wi' yer 'Rule Brytannier.'"

"There ain't no rule." This was Muggins from a crowd lying farther down the frontage. "Each goes after 'is own rat, tonguein' like a lost pup till 'e gits it. Four year I bin on Mindoorie an' niver did no harm; an' why for shud I be 'aunted wi' their bellerin' night by night? Why shud I? They'd guv a pertater-pit the bloomin' 'ump. 'Wish I was out o' it."

"We c'd manage along, I dessay. How 'd he rope 'em in, Clint?"

"Drink," said Muggins loudly. "Drink—hev-e-ry

time. An' terbaccer. An' glory. It was that netted yer Lavel, Cortiss—an' Sheehan goed in fur the beer. So did hevery last one on yer go in fur the beer."

"So 'd you a-gone for 't if yer 'd hed the show, you slack-legged pukaki," said a stern voice from the shadows. "An' so 'll I go for you in two acts, an' make a theatre skylight of you. Tie him up, Walt, can you?"

Walt rolled over several times, tucked Muggins' head under his arm, and continued to smoke in placidity.

"All s'rene. I got a lien on his neck-button. Worry along, you wasters."

There was movement and nervous coughing from under the weeping gum where three tenors sat and a soprano. (It was Betts alone called himself a soprano, for Harry Morel said that he was a freak, and Cortiss classified him as a 'orrible mix-up.) Cortiss began to beat time with hands and feet. Came a tentative murmur from the tenors, and a full volley from the extended enemy.

"Cortiss, what yer goin' on like a ergitty sheep for?" "Cortiss, don't you know better 'n to tread bottom when you're swimming? Lift your feet, man." "Oh-ho, Cortiss; rock me ter sleep——"

"Oh, you blighters," howled Sheehan, charging; "we'll rock you."

They were rocked in fifteen pair of willing arms, and cast aside half-dead. Then Cortiss whipped his men back, and let them blow for three heated minutes, saying—

"Hi'm Church of Hengland, an' that's elarstic. But though Hi was Pope of Rome or a nun Hi'll send the next bloomin' interrupter where 'e won't want no more s'prise packets this side 'ell. Tenors, please. Hand the vi'lins, with 'Arry subduin' 'isself accordin' to hunderstandin'."

Harry Morel's whistle was the one pure and perfect thing left him. He sat on the dray-frame; hatless, coatless, in the hot night, and led the tenors through uncertain twitters as of sleepy birds to a clear, tender melody in which each man called on the moon and the delicate breeze to come where his individual love lay dreaming.

Muggins sighed with the blast of a forge bellows; and Cressitt, his one love—she was a six-months' smooth-haired collie—in his armpit, woke to cheer.

"Go steady, young broken-winder. 'Cordin' to Scriptur', all flesh is grass, and I allows it. But while other countries has rank green muck, we has tough yeller tussick what don't care a dump for weather. Stand up to the wind, my top-'eavy tussick, nor let yourself out for goose-grazin'."

"Yer don't know," said Muggins brokenly, with the music working in him. "I did love that gel. I spiled her, I think; I did so much fur her."

"Which gel was that?" Clint was always sympathetic. "I'm a trifle mixed as ter the procession on 'em, so ter speak; not lovin' largely meself."

"Come," bawled Franklin, sitting with the other basses on a rusty harrows untouched by moonlight, "Come! Come! Come! Come!"

"Don't yer be in sech a evolutin' hurry." This in expostulation from the tenors. "We ain't done wi' her yet."

"Lavel always does consider himself the whole blessed box of tricks," murmured Condry, caressing his pipe-bowl.

"So does Franklin think he is too. Franky swears by Lavel, 'n Lavel swears by hisself, not havin' a idee but what was Franky's makin'. Which is a highly nat'ral way o' developin' 'r frien'ship, 'n ever will be."

"Develop ter blazes," said Clint, in swift hostility. "We ain't developin' that away, Walt?"

Walt lifted on his elbows, cuddling his long chin in the heels of his fists.

"This is developin' Cortiss," he said, unheeding. "Look at him handlin' 'em. Draftin' 'n gentlin' 'n beatin'—strat'gy, I call it. Hear t' him curlin' roun' Lavel 'n Co."

"The trouble-with you tenor galoots is your jaws ain't 'inged on right. A man's mouth should hopen to 'is collar-band when 'e's singin'. Lavel attends strictly to 'is nose with 'is teeth clinched, hand the result ain't pleasin'." There was much more in the little Cockney's high voice. Then the verse went on; Cortiss listening with pricked ears and peaky face alert; Lavel, behind O'Conner's bow arm, showing unsteady with anger. Clint nodded.

"Workin' Lavel loose on his floor-plates, Cortiss is. The whole buildin' 'll c'lapse d'reckly. There! I tolt yer."

Cortiss' tough broom-root baton whistled down through the air, and Cortiss screamed—

“Lavel! Hopen your mouth. Hopen your teeth. Hopen your intellecks if you got hany. For 'Eavin's sake don't think you're a tea-kettle hif your spout is hidetical. What? Come along hout 'ere, then, hand let me see you do it.”

“You be blowed!” said Lavel hotly; for someone was sniggering.

“Lavel,” said Cortiss sweetly. “Lavel, my hinterestin' young creetur. Come along hout. Don't be shy.” Then, as Lavel continued in shyness, Cortiss apealed with a bold stroke to the company. “Is hall hour work of the las' two months to go to 'ash 'cause Lavel's pettish? Hif it ain't—punt 'im hout.”

Lavel was punted out with loving admonitions that put sufficient fear into him, and Cortiss straddled before him encouragingly.

“Show a little proper feelin', Lavel. Hit's all for the good of Hempire an' Brother'ood. Now—‘Come where me love——’ Will you hopen your mouth, you disintegratin' mushroom?”

Lavel's immovableness added so much of the point as his thick grey stalk and brown hat drooped to the lank hair missed, and the chorus expressed delighted approval.

“This is enj'y'ble,” cooed Walt against Clint's shoulder. “Reelly enj'y'ble. But I reckon Franklin 'll git his knife inter Cortiss for 't. Land! Here he wobbles—'n wi' sperrit, too.”

Franklin, in stern wrath at this pillory of his

mate, came fiercely with "a lute-toned lay" twenty-seven separate times. Against his solemn bearded weight Cortiss flung himself in prayer, in artless affection, in the rankest Lambeth vernacular. And what time Franklin retired to his harrows, winded, but calm, and the company lay beating its heels in mirth, the conductor went round after the manner of one taking up a collection, and kicked each man impartially and soulfully.

After which the boys pulled themselves together and took the old song as one, lustily, raucously, until Clint said—

"Dreamin'! Pore gel; it's a large pattron nightmare o' cast iron construction as she'll be dreamin'."

"*Destruction*," said a solemn voice from the dark beyond the weeping gum. "Destruction ov Love's Young Drame an' me new hat. Will ye luke on me, ye noisy people?"

It might have been a stage king that stalked, stately and very tall, into the moonlight. But it was only Johnney Murphy, trailing a horse-cover behind him. Johnney had been holiday-making these three days, and his appearance was moist-eyed and elaborately sober.

"He's drawed the strict an' teetotal line 'tween half-seas-over and helpless," said Lum Taylor critically. "Johnney, you're a credit to the fambly. Pity you come so late. Cortiss might a squeejeed you into his nigger minstrels."

"Reshoom the moosic," said Johnney magnifi-

cently. "Sure, 'tis listhenin' at ye I am. An' me singin' that chune mesilf wanst, only there was more ov th' shamrock tu ut i' my day. Oh, thim toimes 'fure I knew a pub from a wheel-barrer!"

"Put 'em side by side and you'd walk into the wrong one now,"—this was Harry from above in the tip-dray,—“for you're far beyond tabulating the difference, Johnney.”

“An' am I so? Hear to ut, then. A wheel-barrer kapes tu straight legs ov ut's own. A pub kapes th' straight legs ov iv'ry man ilse. Did I not see ye th' other noight, Harry, wid me own mouth dhry as a shape-skin long paled? Take ut slow, now. 'Tis a beautiful song, an' melojus.”

He sat cross-legged on the warm grass by the dray wheel, and Cortiss turned to the restive choir.

“We will now take the basses——”

“We will now take the lot,” said someone in vivid decision. “The bloomin' bellerin' lot. And if you keep us waiting, Cortiss, we'll charge you demurrage. Sling out there.”

Cortiss went down on the flood-tide of sound, beating time wildly, and without hope. When all was done he flung away his baton and wiped his wet forehead, groaning.

“If Lane 'as hany last rud'ments of sense 'e'll give us the chuck-hout 'stead of beer. The chuck-hout or the hinternals of a bullet gun. Ne'er mind. Hi can't 'elp it.”

Into the velvet silence that followed, Johnney's voice slid with its long rich vowels.

"How depressin'. Most depressin'. Will ye be goin' tu yer beds now?"

"They got ter waller in the sentimental fust," said Clint, gloomily prophetic. "Old Kintucky Home, wi' vi'lins an' 'cordeons ter cut out fur 'em. I knows the race-card by now, an' had reason ter. Lend yer ears, Mug; yer all ready ter lay fur the sorrer on the heart ter-night."

Muggins' saucer eyes blinked faintly between Walt's square shoulder and the curved back of Cressitt, who was curled with his pup under the window.

"If six gels slipped you up yer 'd know what sorrer is," he said. "An' all on 'em expectin' weddin' presents, too. 'Makes a chap feel sickish, it does. Yes; it makes 'im feel a bloomin' relation hevery time."

Cortiss flickered from the irregular semicircle where he had been putting down pipes with all forces of suasion.

"This starts soft has a baby's downy 'ead," he said, in a voice to match; "hand speech is ruinatin'. Kindly shut your gab."

The accordeons on each dray-shaft took up the burden; the violins came with careful incompetence on the second note; clear and true in the treble Harry's whistle soared out of the darkness, and Muggins groaned once and again.

"Gives yer a pain," he explained. "Listen ter the feet stampin' like sods on a grave."

"He's got a pertickler rat to-night," murmured Cressitt. "An' as I allers says, if music do give

a chap th' stummick-ache, it's meant for chastenin', an' should be taken as meant. Chastenin' is very good medsin for a man."

"That's a little bit o' naked truth," said Walt in Clint's ear. "But though Harry's cuttin' th' soul out 'n hisself wi' that tune 't won't do him much comfort, I reckon."

"Pretty 'nuff, ain't it?" Clint drew at his pipe contentedly. "Whistles like a tui, Harry does."

"Yer got all th' observance o' a bag o' chaff, little man. A tui ain't got a spiled life behint him. Land! Here's ole Pharaoh's army, hoss 'n fut."

The boys caught the verse full-pitched, and rolled it in a free body of song to the birch-bush that lay in black puddles on the silvered breast of the hills. The mock-a-mocks woke there to answer most sweetly, and Johnney sobbed evenly, and with approval. Four-fifths of these here gathered came from homes they were wearied of. The rest had no homes at all. One and all would probably break directly and run over the land; for the young colonial is restless by nature. But outside the old Mindoorie wharè they sang with a rough, strong sweetness that pulled at the spirit's fibres—

"The day goes by like a shadow on the heart
 With sorrow where all was delight;
 The time has come when the darkies have to part—
 Then, my Old Kentucky home, Good-night."

Condy grunted, digging in the earth with an agitated boot-heel.

"Tommy-rot. Beastly tommy-rot. What devil right has it to make a fellow feel—pulpy? Here, Muggins! Stop that snuffling, or there'll be a parting you won't like in a minute."

"Wish I was dead," moaned Muggins, while the music rose and fell soft-breathing, and Cortiss beat time with his head on one side and his thin, peaky face absurdly tender in the pallid light.

"Weep no more, my lady: oh, weep no more to-day;
We will sing one song for the Old Kentucky——"

Here Johnney arose with a long keening wail, and the rigidity of careful balance. Lavel shuddered back against Hales.

"He's seein' things," he gasped. "Look at his horrible eyes. He's seein'—not double—we can do that——"

"Second sight," said Cortiss. "Hit's a Hirish failin' that. Hi've seed it afore. Let 'im go awhile. 'E'll be funny——"

"Ye'll oblige me," said Johnney, wrapping the horse-cover closer, "be consumin' silence, ye Amalekites. Is ut a sarmon ye wud be wantin'? Ye shall have ut, an' Cortiss will go roun' wid th' text. Thrain up yer appetoite in th' way ye're goin', an' phwhen ye are ould ut will not deparrt from ye. More particularly if ut be an appetoite for th' drink. Ay, Harry, me bould bhoy; ut is yoursilf shud know that." He came forward three paces, with the moonlight dead-white on his disordered hair and beard, and yellow in his bleared, strained eyes. "Harry! Phwhat was ut

ye are seein', Harry? Day an' noight an' grey mornin'——"

"Choke him, somebody." A shirt-sleeved figure sprang up in the dray. "He's chronic once you let him get going. Dry up, you particular old fool."

"Brown rocks," chanted Johnney, swaying wildly. "Brown rocks ahl shiny in th' sun, an' a stinkin' fire wid a man——"

There was the snarl of a rapidly slung belt-strap through the air, and Harry Morel followed it. Franklin caught the strap, and five others caught Harry. For killing showed in his face. Moreover, there was possibly something of interest toward.

"Belt him to-morrow if he tells too much," said Lum Taylor cheerfully. "We're going to let him run now. Hope it ain't anything scand'lus, Harry. 'Member we're only innocent little choir-boys."

"He's drunk-mad," said Harry, disdainingly to struggle. "I don't care a curse what he says."

"'Course yer don't." Lavel giggled over Tony's shoulder. "Pitch it straight, Johnney. What's the little joke? We'll check it by what we knows o' him."

There was smell of strong meat in the air, and shivers ran on Condyl's spine as he watched. Man is very merciless to man when curiosity holds the door.

"May ahl saints deliver us," cried Johnney, sawing his arms as if in benediction from the pulpit. "Nivir will I decave ye. Ut is taught

us i' the Parliamint'ry Hansard that trut' lois at th' bottom ov wells an' in ahl other places phwhere she does not want tu lit on tu her name. Bhut I will not loi annyphwhere. Ut is th' outside ov tu pound sivinteen ye are owin' me, Dan Sheehan——”

Sheehan's answer came on a crest of laughter.

“I never, you white-eyed Paddy. It was on'y two-ten to begin with, an' thirty shilluns 'lowed off that when you took over my new trousers that was bell-bottoms all the way up.”

“Which the pockuts burrnt out ahl complete fust toime I putt a loighted poipe in thim,” said Johnney sternly. “Just hear tu him, iv ye plase. The boundin' cheek ov th' man!” Beyond the straight plantation line the silver of the far hills caught his fancy, and he flung up his arm. “Luke! Do you see ut?”

“Yes, yes,” cried Hales, shaking him. “But Harry! What about Harry?”

“Oh, Harry! I am not havin' thruck wid Harry. There is somethin' acrost the hills—luke. Ut is beyant thim an' far away will ye be phwhen th' dyin'-toime comes for ye. Iv'ry man, savin' an' ixcipt,”—here Johnney stared round the group that stood dumb, and Walt came to his side with intent to bring him down,—“ixcipt t'ree. For thim ut is th' saddle an' th' snowdrift an' th' bottle, an' a retoiremint tu the little hill behint th' township wid a railin' roun' thim.” He gave a cry that brought a jump out of each one there. “Arrah! Was there no song ye cud be singin'”

bhut that, bhoys dear? Ut will kill th' hearrt in me wan day, wid th' sorrer an' the chune an' th' toime phwhen the ould mates have tu parrt. Will ye lind me wan more dhrink——”

He sat suddenly, and Cortiss' Choir shook a clammy fear from them as Harry Morel slipped past and got his arms round the weeping Johnney.

“Come away to bunk, you giddy old bandicoot. My faith! it's the bottle for yourself, Johnney, and no one else. Grip on to him, Walt.”

Johnney wept still.

“I saw ut. I saw ut. I will forgit come mornin'. Bhut I saw ut. An' wan day ye will know.”

“Good luck to the first man who goes, then,” said Condylightly, and grabbed Muggins by the ankle. “Muggins, you funk; will you ever dare cross saddle again?”

“Did you see 'Arry's face?” demanded Cortiss, as the limp burden was borne into the wharè. “It was chock-up gashly. Pity we never got more of that sight-seein' of Johnney's. 'Twould hev taught us somethin'. But Hi'll tell you this: 'e spoke raw truth.”

“'Wonder who'll be the first to prove it,” said Tony, with a little shudder. And Cortiss' Choir went to bed, uneasy and troubled in mind.

“HELL-FOR-LEATHER.”

OLD Reuben James shivered at the door of a third-rate township pub, and railed on the man in the street. The man in the street was Tony Lascelles. He had called Reuben from his bed to a half-fledged morning blowing raw down the empty ways with a pallid sunrise behind it and a sinking mist that was chill to bare feet and the bare chest under Reuben's coat.

Tony stood back on the curb, his mare's bridle hooked into his left armpit, and the clay of twenty sidings and river-bottoms on his leggings. To the tail of a full day's labour he had laid forty-one miles of saddle-work, and the swing of his body was still free and light, and his keen young eyes were eager.

Reuben had ridden to the beat of hot blood in his time; but he had forgotten, as men forget the days on their mothers' knees.

“You go 'ome an' grow sense,” he said; “an' nex' mornin' as you wake me through the sleep-time fur a foolery as any sane man 'ud put 'is 'eel on I guess I'll know it.”

“You're taking him up for Anderton to break. Don't be an old chouse, Rube. I only want you to give me first show.”

Reuben had not the pride which makes a man care for the pride of his kind. He huddled his greatcoat about him, and wore round stiffly.

"Anderton's the fust horse-breaker this side chance. I ain't goin' ter hev no bloomin' syracuse top o' that colt. 'Is full brother died dumb-mad on the rein, an' this one is outcast slap through. Near killed Jolly, he did, an' Pat Barnes."

Tony blocked the closing door with his foot. The sap of boyhood was hot in his cheeks, but his temper was under command. A man who would handle horses is schooled to that—first, last, and all hours in between.

"I'm better than Jolly—lumps better. Let me up on him, Rube. Anderton can tackle him after."

"What yer doin' it fur? Been bettin'?"

"No."

"Plain devilment, then?" Tony nodded.

"He's thrown every rider in the district 'cept Anderton—and me."

A quick red shot Reuben's dull eyes. Somewhere in the groping past he too had known a man's lust for an equal fight.

"There was young fools back in my day——"

"They've grown old since. Let me ride him, Rube. I won't kill him."

"Well, on yer own 'ead if 'e kills you. Mind that! We kin take 'im ter that empty section jinin' Mother Marcock's—but yer 'll hev ter saddle-up in the stall."

Reuben heard the clatter of the mare's swift

hoofs down the stable alley-way as he climbed back to his room. He sat on the bed with his grey stubble head in hands that shook.

“Eh, my days; my days that used ter be! Is it a cross in the breed somewheres makes a man guv 'is soul ter be cock o' 'is own dung'ill, an' a 'oss stan' it out till 'e's cut inter strips. Eh, eh; it's good buildin' stuff till the blood-cement rots!” He looked down at his stiff, bony knees; sighed, and rolled back to the pillow. “Messin' wi' my mornin' siasters that away! Wonder will 'e put in some sleep fur 'isself.”

The wild track to windward was for Tony and such men of his make who judge their strength by no tape-measures, but go and find out for themselves. These are the good days before thigh-and-nerve strain take charge to weaken the back-muscles and stiffen the limbs.

Tony found Reuben's colt in a loose-box. It would lead to the ends of earth unobjecting, and went into the bridle serenely. Tony's bridle was plain, with straight bit and light curb. He whipped on a lip-strap, took up a last hole in the throat-lash, and talked the soft talk that all horses love whilst he cast up the points he could give and could take.

The colt was a raking light bay, standing seventeen hands. His crest and wither were plain and too low. Tony guessed how most men had left him. Behind he was mightily made, and the fall of his ribs was perfection. The Bairndale stock showed in his width of chest and in the long, clean,

muscular forearm. The Imp temper was awake in his white-rimmed full eye and the proud sideways carriage of his flag.

“And she said, “I am glad I have found you, my lad,”” murmured Tony, backing out into the light of day where fifteen loafers smoked with Reuben.

“Yer won't saddle 'im in the section,” snapped Reuben.

“Don't want a saddle. Open the gate some of you fellows.”

“That 'oss needs more 'n jes' ridin',” cried Reuben, hobbling after. “Yer needs grit, an' secon' sight, an' the temper o' a scurifim, an' jes' so much more devil 's 'e got 'isself 'at it won't let yer tire.”

Tony laughed. His shoulders showed confidence, and the morning sun was clear in his eyes. He jammed the hurdle of the railed section behind the colt's tail, and led out to the centre. A drabbed woman throwing water from a back door paused, her hand on her hip, to watch. Seven children and a tramp climbed the fence beside Reuben's squad, and a voice said from somewhere—

“ Picks up his feet like a bally-darncer, that colt.”

“'E'll pick up more 'n 'is feet d'reckly,” growled Reuben. “Chuck 'isself over like a skippin'-rope, 'e can. 'Scuppered three chaps a'ready.”

Tony ran a light firm hand along the crest, gathered the reins, and sprang. The colt shivered, drew two breaths, and began to buck. He bucked four times round the section, with a rattle of

broken tins and refuse underfoot, and half the township wide-eyed on the fence-rail. He pig-jumped, kicked mule-wise, struck out with swift, savage forefeet. Tony sat him from ears to rump, and perceptibly under the barrel. It was not pretty riding, but it made the men on the fence hold their breath.

“Mout as well try to buck out ’r his skin be appearances. That chap’s workin’ in a loose socket, but he won’t part. Who is he?”

A rabbitier told. He had been in to the township to knock down his cheque, and a something of the keen, clean edge of life came back as he leaned over the rail to see.

“Eh, eh,” said Reuben. “Tony ain’t no bloomin, onjonny, but this is cradlin’ ter what ’e’s goin’ ter git. Ah-h! Sulky!”

The colt propped suddenly; head down, legs bunched, and body humped like an anthill. Tony swung upright with the promptness of a steel-yard indicator; wrenched the rein in a cast-iron grasp, and brought his short green-hide whip along the quarter with a neat drawing stroke. The colt sprang from it, screaming, and the rabbitier straightened in a pride to which he had no claim.

“They’re going to get down to it now! Hy-ah, Tony; break his heart, break his heart! They’re none so blessed tough when you knows how.”

Tony had cast his hat and coat at the hurdle. The sun was cruel on his forehead, his shoulders, and the neck above the collar-band as the colt

swung, and twisted, and fought; wicked, cunning, and untired. The sweat grew greasy on the hairy barrel, and Tony stuck by his knee-grip and spurs. He used the whip in unflagging continuance because clean through him he knew the defiance of the mad heart that thumped under his leg. In a two-yard circle the earth spun up in dust. It stung Tony's eyes and gritted in his teeth. The colt gathered and shot up like a rocket, slinging round to land his hind feet in the marks of his fore. Tony had looked for that. He countered by blows on the quivering muzzle and a fiercer hook of the spurs.

Then the colt went blind-mad, and from the fence Reuben crowed loud approval.

It was a keen, quick battle of wills, with no mercy to give or to take. For each was glutted with hate, and the blood on the heaving sides was full paid by the blood on the reins that slipped and were caught again to rasp through the straining hands.

"Hammer an' tongs," said the rabbitier pensively. "Hammer an' tongs, an' the hot coals under. He'll be filed an' put by till the Trumpets come, d'rectly. But it's wuth comin' out for to see."

The colt went up straight as a dying whale, and the backward thud in the dust-spume turned men sick. It was a clever fall, but Tony slung clear. He had been there before for the learning.

He came up on the colt, and a cheer rocked the fence. Then the thing grew automatical. The wild beat of hooves on the breathless air; the flash of bared teeth and white eyes; the dead-weight

shock shaking the earth. And always, somehow and somewhere, rose Tony, unbroken and sitting still, as the great shoulders heaved themselves upright.

“’E’ll do it ten times yet,” said Reuben, “an’ twenty to back it. No man can stan’ it out that long. It’s a crool ’ard game ter play. ’E’ll git pinched in the endin’, an’ no fault o’ ’is either—by th’ Lord, ’e was near it that time!”

Tony carried no weight, and he kept his head cool. It is wise to do this when a hairbreadth mistake in deduction may grind out the hot life in one gasp. But the strain tightened moment by moment. All his powers were flung forward on guard, and the colt met each move with a fury and despair that were human. Sweat ran off the two, and once the lather of the wither smeared Tony’s mouth as he twisted free. This turned him giddy for an instant, but he came back with jaw clamped like a bull-dog. For a man must go through with the thing he commences.

The sun flared to midday, and passed it. Children gaped through the rails on their way from the schools, and half the fence-line went home to their dinners. The rabbitier pulled out his pipe, looked at it sadly as his gorge rose, and dropped it back in his pocket.

“Must a-bin worse ’n I thought,” he said. “No smokin’ fur me this week—an’ I had the nerve o’ that boy onst! But he won’t break the horse. I seen men like him—lots. You can kill ’em by inches, but they’ll never be broke.”

Someone in authority was speaking to Reuben. The old man rocked on the rail and chuckled.

"Go an' stop it yerself, then," he said. "Man, I've seed a good fight this day. A full foot o' raw hide 'e's lost off of that whip, an' the 'ide 'e's lost o' 'is own ain't fur countin'."

"It's a brutal exhibition," said someone in authority. Reuben grunted.

"It's nat'ral. One must be master. Yer must break, or break others. But 'e ain't goin' ter squee-gee th' Ten Cantonments out 'n that brute."

A half-hour later he slid from the fence and went up the section. In the far corner, where all the grass was torn up, the colt was tying himself into reef-knots and unravelling with indescribable elaborations.

"You come off of there, Tony," shouted Reuben. "Yer done yer possible, an' more. 'E's a devil, that's what 'e is—an' a Zebberah too, jes' now. But yer mout's well warp th' bark off a tree. 'E'll die 'fore 'e guvs it best."

Tony was dead-white, and as near exhaustion as a man may well be. The snapping of his pride had stung him to recklessness, and his voice came charged with sobs.

"I'll kill him, then. By the Lord, I will kill him! Stand back, you ass."

He rained down the blows blindly, and the colt reached round, bringing away a legging-strap with his lathered buck teeth. Reuben grew angry.

"Come down out o' that, yer young coleopusus. What? Anderton! I'll not take 'im ter Anderton.

Turn 'im loose on the 'ills agin—that's all' e's fit fur. Let 'im run wi' the mob an' be darned. Tony, will yer come now, eh?”

Tony came. To they on the fence he said stoutly that he was beaten—drummed clean out of camp. Then he locked Reuben's door against his prayers and curses, fell upon the bed, and shivered and cried with pure body and nerve ache. It is not nice to go out to fly a kite and then lose it when it has pulled you into the ditch.

Reuben saddled for home in the morning. The colt's ribs were not pretty to look at, but he carried himself with the dignity of a conqueror. He stood at the rings by the bar door beside Reuben's old hack, and the Hatter crossed the street zigzag to lean for balance on the colt's quarter. Ten voices warned him off. The Hatter worked along to the colt's neck, and kissed him beerily; and the colt nuzzled against the beard with his full eye kind.

“Nice hoss that,” remarked the Hatter, proceeding to the bar. “W-w-what yer want for him, you what b'longs him?”

“Ten pund,” said Reuben, smelling a joke.

“L-losht my hosses somewheres,” said the Hatter. “I'll took him.”

He pulled his trouser-pocket inside out on the bar, and made up the amount in half-sovereigns and coppers, borrowing three-and-fivepence from a musterer. Then he led the colt round to the stables. And eighteen men went with the Hatter, to see him load up his half-year's stores on Reuben's colt.

Tony came down the stairs as the two rode into the street-way. The Hatter swayed atop of clattering billies, bags of flour, and cooking-pots, and he was hauling the colt's head about with a rusty bit in a broken green-hide bridle.

"Git ap," he said, hitting the colt between the ears with an iron spoon. The colt broke into a long free trot, and passed in rolling dust over the bridge and up the hill. Tony sat down on the horse-trough.

"I had no hand in that," he said. Reuben nodded agreement.

"'E's a man, that colt, fur all 'e's a outcast. 'E'll fight 'is ekils knee ter knee, an' no quarter. 'E'll be tender as a woman wi' the 'Atter what is a child an' cud load 'im up wi' the Tour o' Babble an' 'isself as roof. But 'e'll 'ave no man 'is master. I seen that kind o' thing afore."

"And what the mischief is the sense of telling me that now?" asked Tony savagely.

HANTOCK'S DISSERTATION.

“ Oh, the nor'-west rising grimly where the stern hills stand up dimly ;

Oh, the reckless ride of rivers to the sea ;

Oh, the careless sun-kissed reaches, and the fierce white battered beaches—

We are part of you, and all that is To Be.”

In Our Own Right.

LANE had been giving his men orders for the next day's work, and the Man from England was puzzled at little irregularities connected with the performance. He said so later, from the big chair before the library fire, and Lane laughed, nodding across the open fireplace at Hantock.

“ That's the man to go to if you want to find out things about the colonial. Hantock knows 'em from backbone to waistcoat button. Ask him.”

“ Why,” said the Man from England promptly, turning in his chair, “ can't a colonial say 'sir,' or touch his hat, or take his hands out of his pockets when he's speaking to his betters? And why does he tacitly suggest the idea that if you called him names he'd knock your head off?”

Hantock was drawing the life into his pipe with a half-smile on his thin lips, and so it was Lane who answered.

"I don't know—unless it is because he would. And, you see, he works hand and foot with so many of his betters that he loses respect for reverence."

"Ah," said Hantock in approval, and the Man from England said that he didn't see. Lane drummed on the chair-rail nervously. He was not a man of words.

"Respect is outward acknowledgment of superiority, I take it. That's English, and we have sloughed it pretty completely. Reverence is inward acknowledgment of superiority. Suppose a man can cut out a steer, or wheel a mob with the skill of a general, or ride a horse that is known to be a man-killer, or—or do any of a million other things that prove him to be a *man*. Your colonial reverences that man, whatever his birth—but that doesn't make him take off his hat to him."

Lane looked over at Hantock. There was not one in Southland did not reverence the Special Constable after this manner. "There's something of the heathen about us yet," he added. "The Greeks worshipped men."

"Good heavens! so do we," said the Man from England. "But we worship other things too."

"Well," said Lane, "I think the colonial doesn't—generally. But ask Hantock."

Hantock flung himself back in the hollow of his chair, and blew smoke at the ceiling.

"You haven't got the thing straight from the outset," he said. "Colonial is nearly as loose a term as European. Don't you tell a Sydney chap (fellow is technically correct over there) that you

took him for a New Zealander, or ask a man from the Gulf how they pack Tasmanian apples. You'd get branded as an outcast, you know. And probably they'd call you their own special kind of a fool too."

The Man from England had been a public-school boy, and he knew something of internal splits.

"But they are all one for the honour of the Colonies."

"Are they? Don't you believe it! Each colony for itself, and "the devil take the hindmost"—that's all the others. They can't be all one. They're made on entirely different lasts. And yet there are some idiots who imagine that a colonial is merely a transplanted Englishman. He isn't. Nothing like it."

The Man from England was one of these idiots, and he was not afraid to say so.

"The colonial comes of an English stock, not three generations back."

"I grant you that. But he's grafted on to something that England doesn't know anything about. My dear chap, you'll never understand your Imperial obligations unless you consider for a little minute all the things he is grafted on to, and their results."

"Can I do it in a minute? For——"

Lane grinned.

"Let Hantock burble. He really does know a little of what he's talking about."

"See here, then." Hantock sat forward, and waved his pipe emphatically. "The Englishman

is—speaking generally—the product of centuries of civilisation. For all practical purposes you can take him in the block. The colonial is—always speaking generally—the product of the land that cradles him; and he can't be taken in the block. That's the wall that so many wise men run their heads against. Well?"

"An Englishman is an Englishman, no matter what part of the world he is born in. Why is a colonial born in Sydney unlike one born in New Zealand?"

Hantock groaned, and Lane explained with a chuckle.

"You've made that exact point that Hantock has been hammering at you all the time, my dear fellow. A colonial is not a product of civilisation; he is a product of the soil. If the rest of the world saw this, it would go to the country that produced him, and not to his forebears."

"You've seen something of our land?" asked Hantock.

The Man from England had been touring New Zealand for the last two months.

"A little bit," he said.

"There you get the keynote, then—in the land. You'll see the New Zealander in the rivers. They tear out a way for themselves slap ahead, and ride down to the sea with a strength and a reckless you-be-damnedness that is entirely their own. They go their own lonely ways through the country, and if you interfere with 'em, they'll undermine your supports and leave you in a muddle

of shingle. You can't sail a boat on many of our rivers; they are too untamed. We dam them occasionally—but we do it in fear.”

“Might get your head knocked off,” murmured the Man from England.

“Exactly. There's a lot of the New Zealand river in her men; and there's a lot of the plains too. The great wide spaces, and the miles of blowing tussock, and the flax-swamps—my word, they're dandy places for duck-shooting! And the glorious clean air that makes you fit to jump a house when it comes out of the hills where no man has breathed it yet. That is all on its own, as it were.”

“You've forgotten the nor'-westers,” suggested Lane.

“I haven't. I take particular interest in the nor'-wester, because I think that that's where the New Zealander gets most of his characteristics. Oh, you may jeer. I speak truth. The nor'-wester is a grand thing. Look at the plain-country. The rain-soakage would breed all the world's fevers in the rich soil if it wasn't for the winds. They'd kill any other country. They make Central New Zealand. You can't do anything but get out of the way of a nor'-wester when it's on the ramp. It will have its own pernicious way, and it does fiendish things for the pure joy of it. But it serves its country all the same. There's a lot of the nor'-wester in our men. It helps them to do things that no sane man would do. But we get there all the same. Harry Morel—eh, Lane?”

"I was thinking of him. Yes. But there's too much of the tropical temperament in Harry. He's a northerner."

"He's got the nor'-wester in his blood, all the same. You can't tame him. And there are the mountains. I've heard fellows say that we can knock spots out of Switzerland for scenery. I don't know anything about that, but, mind you, there's a power and a kind of stern reticence about our back-country that leaves its mark on our men. You won't find a New Zealander babbling of his feelings much. And that's not entirely his British breed. The everlasting hills that make the backbone of our islands make the backbone of our people too. And the knowledge that this is a new land, and theirs to handle and to shape, gives 'em that grasp of Imperialism——"

"It's grasp of the soil he means, really," said Lane; "only he's fond of big words. Perhaps you've noticed?"

"—Grasp of Imperialism that's going to carry us on to mighty issues—when we're old enough."

"You'll need to learn the outward forms of spiritual grace," suggested the Man from England.

"I believe you. A New Zealander hasn't much spiritual grace. He's a Vandal, I think. He burns the bush, and plants *Pinus insignis*; and he hasn't a decent picture-gallery in the two islands. Likewise, it is very true that he has a large lack of respect for anything—except himself."

"That," said the Man from England, "is——"

"The beginning. Of course. When he has a

few hundred years to his back, and all his own full-fledged customs to respect, in place of the cut-down second-hand ones of over-seas, he'll respect 'em all right. But I don't think he will ever be an Englishman."

"But—he'll become the product of civilisation."

"Yes. But colonial civilisation is a thing that's not on the roster yet. We hardly know what the world will have to reckon with when it is. It's going to be a big thing. But the Australian and the New Zealander will eternally be Sons of the Empire, although they will eternally object to being taken in the lump."

"Do Sons of the Empire include the women?"

"Distinctly. Though, mind you, the New Zealand woman——"

"Now, you stop it," said Lane, getting up. "Don't let him tell you anything about the women, old chap. He understands the colonial man pretty artificially correctly, but he doesn't know a thing about women."

"Do any of us?" asked the Man from England ruminating.

Hantock laughed.

"She thinks we don't, anyway," he said.

THE TAIL OF THE ROPE.

“Ha’ ye stood on the bank when a big log rolls
Wi’ the grip-lines squealin’ like tortured souls?
Ha’ ye followed the shoe on the logging-track,
An’ ducked to the threat o’ the wire-ropes’ crack?
Ha’ ye handled the axe—heard the keen saw bite,
An’ rode down the hills on the trucks at night?
Mate o’ mine, she calls us; she’s stronger than we—
Come back to the bushland, old mate, wi’ me.”

The Men of the Bush.

TWO men sat on the little iron jigger that straddled the wooden tram-line. The sleep of the dog-tired clogged yet in their eyes, and the young sunlight cast their shadows weakly on the bare, dewed earth. Dickson swung his legs, smoked, and burred of the day’s work. He was of the breed that slaves like a mule, and has never the sense to kick. These are good men for the making of a new country—when they are led.

Lavel scowled at the half-open hut-door two chain back from the line, and gave no answers. He was not taking any pleasure in the thought of this day’s work. He turned his eyes to the dumb sawmill, and the waking huts scattered among the half-felled bush-rubbish; and as the light travelled round to strike Cornell’s window to blank scarlet,

he shivered with more than cold. Lavel was a shoeman, and Cornell was driver of the little eight-horse power engine that hauled the shoe, and there were unforgivable words between them. Cornell had an absolutely evil temper, and—according to the lay of the work—Lavel was more or less in his mercy.

Inside the hut Sereld raked among the tinware on the table, and growled because someone had spilt tobacco-ash into his crib—which is bushman for dinner. In the Southland timber country the hands live in a colony of sod or weather-board wharès, and cook for themselves. It being Lavel's week, there was a peculiarly villainous sea-pie in Sereld's bag, and a worse one in Dickson's.

"Same old thing," grumbled Sereld. "Bob, you sneak, where's my knife? Same old graft. Same old brutal beastly blazin' day. Same——" Here Lavel howled fury from the line, and Sereld kicked open the door with the terminal, "Same old yell o' Lavel's."

"Bedad, thin, it's same ould lazybones tu," said Bob M'Coy, and leapt for the jigger with his crib flying at tail of the neck-strap.

But Lavel hit sulkily at cunning attempts to unseat him.

"Stop it off! I ain't goin' to sweat up this mornin', an' no more Dickson isn't. You git down to it, you couple o' wasters what can't do a day's graft atween you."

Sereld settled astride, and his eyes looked nasty.

"Let her out," he said, with his strong hands

gripped on the bar. "Shove off, Dickson, you ass. We're going to shake the teeth out of Lavel."

"Begorra," said Bob amiably, and up the first grade that climbed into the bush the jigger rocked like a scow in a tideway.

Lavel waggled at the nose of her, and his heart was very weak in him. For the powerful shoulder and thigh strokes that bore them by trestle-bridge, and underhung siding, and sharp, breathless grades, brought remorselessly nearer the time of his trial. And Lavel was not in any sense a brave man.

"Blow you!" he said presently; "yer needn't bust the whole blessed way, you fools."

"Oh yes, we need! Bob, you're blown. Chuck it up to Dickson. Come and be sweated, Dickson."

"I was on'y gettin' at you, Sereld. You've got the wind o' a bullock. Go slow a bit, old chap. I—I was wantin' to see Franklin."

"Will you lump it, Bob, 'fore I make you?" Lavel's sneer had cut deep into Sereld, and Bob obediently changed over on peak of a saddle that flared out in great ridges of sunlit shining greens footed by gullies where night still clung.

Lavel twisted his neck over Sereld's shoulder, and saw another jigger labour heavily up the steep.

"Let me off. I want to wait for——"

"No." Sereld laid all his body-strength to the bar, and Lavel dropped under the wheel promptly.

It was quite likely that he was looking for an accident, for a nervous man will do strange things when dogged by fear. But the three picked him out unhurt, and called him a "scabby loafer," and

other names beside. Then the jigger stormed downward with way on to jump her clear of the warped long-laid lines at a corner, and Lavel clung by his eyelids and boot-heels, baulking another snatch at death.

The spring day woke with all fresh scents among the fern and delicate under beauty in the deep bushy ways. The jigger clattered over trestled boardings where clear brown streams ran among the rocks, ploughed through the mud of a swampy patch where rushes grew rank and evil, and climbed ever with labouring breath to the heart of the timber country.

To right and to left the mightiest trees were gone, and the logging roads had scored yellow desolation down to banks where the rotting stages were crumbling.

This was the beginning of the good which Adams' sawmills had done for the bush of Southland. Year by year the line-filaments snaked deeper and deeper into the heart of it; tapped rolling hilltop, and secret gully, and wild ravine, and drew out the pride of them that it might be sawn, docked, planed, and sent citywards to the timber yards, where it forgot the stern mountains that cradled it.

Nature sickens at this kind of thing while the foot of man is on her. But when it tramples forward with the haste of the despoiler, she decently covers her bruises. And — being a wasteful old lady—she used for the covering such vagrant glories of feather-headed tree-fern and

wide-eyed clematis, and such a wonderment of ochre and chestnut and crimson mosses over the limbless trunks that choked the earth-pores and would not rot, that little Hefton stole the two ends of his day's toil through a season, and collected with ignorance and ardour. Franklin burnt the whole pile of stuff as peat in the winter, and Hefton remonstrated by an attempt at poison—but that was after this day.

In his wrath and strength Sereld carried them upwards and forwards to the shadow-country where solid birch bush shut out God's heaven, and the needles of rimu and totara rotted in the rich sludgy soil among thirty-five kinds of fern and creeping plants.

The air was chilly up at the line terminus, and shrieking with the joining force of wood and iron, and the wrath of breaking rock. More sleepers climbed the hill ahead, and the unset wooden rails lay everywhere like split matches.

These things belonged to the gangers who were doomed to chase the bushmen eternally with the tramline. The engineer was up inspecting an impossible grade over the hill, and Duck Pennis volunteered the information that Black Bill and Carter had gone on.

Sereld and Bob cast the jigger off into the young furry bracken before the one behind ran over it. There were many other jiggers there, but Franklin had not come up yet. Nor had Cornell; for the hauling engine stood on the bank, black, blind, and sulky.

Lavel would have given half the years of his life to rip the gearing out of her effectually. Failing that, he would seek the help of Franklin. He perched on the tail of the tender.

"Now, then, what are you loafers doin'? Git along after t'others. I'm goin' to wait for Franklin."

"Whaffor?"

"You mind your own business. Sereld! Leggo, you brute! I—I hurt my leg fallin' off that blanky ole jigger, an' I'm goin' to give it a spell."

"Malingerin, by gum!" Sereld was yet steeped in gall. "Not much you don't, Lavel. You made me sweat up those seven mile, and I'm going to make you sweat over this two and a half. Head him off there, boys. No use your kicking, you little snipe."

It is this service of the bush which draws all the giants of the land to it, and Sereld was mighty among them. It drew Franklin again and again through his life; and when his hands began to ache for the axe-haft, he ever came straight to it, and to the mysterious power of the new-opened bush and the crashing triumph of fallen timber. The longing had caught him last on Mindoorie, and two months after Lavel followed him, because the mountains and the valleys made him lonely for his mate.

The men of the back-country are hardy as their own pine and birch forests, and have a peculiar lack of sympathy for the man who complains of a hurt while yet his four limbs and his head remain to him. Besides, Sereld knew that Lavel was

telling lies. As a liar, Lavel was beneath contempt, and for this reason it was purely necessary that he should be whipped up the blazed track, and hounded through the creeks, and taught repentance along the tangled cliff-tops. And so it was that they came, hot and very dirty, to the raffle of drying stuff that gave to the working space, where Lavel sat on the earth forthwith and used surprising language.

He was sick with a coward's fear, but he turned with a snarl on Black Bill and Carter when their cross-cut bit through a trunk and dropped it for the shoe.

"Ready, are you? Well, I ain't—and I ain't goin' ter be yet. *No*, I won't call Cornell up. You leave me alone."

"We've been tryin' to teach him manners," explained Sereld, stripping to his work. "He's not letter-perfect yet—right you are, Carter. I'll worry along till Franklin and Co. turn up."

Carter contracted the felling for Adams. With Franklin he cut away the low scrub that would impede the fall, and scarfed the timber for the saw. He crashed into the undergrowth with a keen eye for the kings of the southern bush—matai, rimu, totara, and birch; and the sob of his quick axe rang where it struck the death mark.

Then came Franklin with three more, and Lavel fastened on him straightly.

"Did—did you smash Cornell? I didn't hear of a row."

"Na." Franklin shook himself shaggily. "I

did ma most, Lavel mon, but the fule wadna fight. He juist went tae his bunk an' lauched. 'Mon,' said he, 'I'll hae tae tak' yer words, for I canna stomach yer hond.'"

It was Lavel's custom to get into trouble through his waspish tongue, and then to make Franklin's great fist clear him of it. And Franklin never failed—if the enemy would fight. He was a burly, dour bull of a man, who could work like ten, and, for some hid reason, he loved Lavel.

His hand fell to his mate's shoulder now, for Lavel was pinched with terror.

"What's troublin' ye, Lavel mon?"

There was nothing could teach Franklin that the other man's soul seethed often in a hell of fear. Some said that Lavel traded on this.

"Nothin'. Sereld knocked me off the jigger, an' skinned my knee. Leave me go, Franklin. I must be startin'."

He had laid his fingers to the line that connected with the engine-whistle, but Franklin's grip came over it.

"Sereld wull pay for that this nicht. An' ye'll not go doon wi' the shoe, mon. I'll tak' it masel. Stand ye clear, till I see is she in richt order."

He heaved up the shoe—which is a much overgrown road-scoop tilted at the nose—tested the grips, and wrenched at the wire-rope that had its beginnings on the engine-drum.

"Richt she is. Hond us the whustle-line."

Lavel spoke with his tongue dried leather. The tide had set as he wished, and already he feared it.

"Cornell's just the sort o' sneak to git even wi' me by foolin' with the rope—and that'll mean a almighty smash. I can't let you——"

"Div ye jalouse he'll be at thae tricks? Dommed if I dinna tak' him tae pieces the night, then! Losh, mon, I wadna gi't tae ye for warlds. A-ye, Cornell, ma birkie, it wull be deep-sea fushin' if ye gae ployin' up, an' haulin' in that line wi' me tae the slack o't."

His joy rumbled up in his chest as he cast off all but dungarees and singlet, and buckled in his waist-strap. This night he would lay out both Cornell and Sereld—if Cornell did not fall short of his promise.

Like all weak men, Lavel hated the prick of conscience.

"You're too heavy, Franklin, and it'll be rotten going. I'm game to take it."

There were men who said that Franklin had no tenderness in him. They did not see him now.

"Ma lad, I ken ye're game eneuch—but no wi' that bad leg. Three short for the back-rope, is it? Richt. We'll be seein' what Cornell's about the noo."

At the jerk of the whistle-line a valve far away opened to scream explanation at Cornell. The back-rope tightened in obedience, and the heel of the shoe slithered creakily beneath the two placed birch logs. Franklin jumped for the iron grips, flung them together across the raw ends, and growled approval as the forward rope took charge and the grips locked under the strain.

"Hooked fair eneuch, onyways. Noo, ma man, we're comin'."

The shoe scuttled off in a bull-nosed importance that tickled Franklin.

"Losh," he said, "she kens the way o't, the beauty;" and he picked up the bar, and crashed alongside through the young fuchsia and matapo.

Over the unevenness of the way the shoe rose and dipped as a boat takes the sea. The unseen force that drew her fascinated Franklin—until he wanted to control it. This was at the primary turning where the whole bulk of her took the outside edge in haste, and jammed a green forked limb in the side of the grip. The thing slewed sideways, and the rope held, recognising no command of his. It hummed to a tenseness beyond sound, so that Franklin fought in powerful desperation, and it ran over his foot into freedom again.

"You deevil," he said, and hurried after, limping. "Ma faith, Cornell, tak' yer ploy the noo, mon, for ye'll no' be wantin' much when I'm done wi' ye."

Without any doubt whatever Cornell was taking his ploy. The thing was going over the greasy half-made track at twelve miles an hour, and did not know even the rudiments of jumping. She had intent to take every obstacle full, unless Franklin was there to fend her off.

A little lime spring ran along a natural fluming and dripped into the track. This was the bog that Lavel had tried to stanch with cut fern and

brush, and there had been two days' rain on it since Lavel went down last. The shoe waddled into it, sank by the nose, squattered and wallowed until the rank mud squelched over her side. Under the strain of the taut rope she began to kick. This was preparatory to standing on her head, when all would be over but the pleasure of killing Cornell.

Franklin got himself and the bar down in the mud under the forefront of the shoe, and the rope stretched past his ear with all the sag of a new rail. With the whistle-line between his teeth he prayed that the shriek of the open valve might even now be maddening the gangers down at the terminus. For that which Lavel had feared was come already, and the test was brute force against machinery, topped by the writhing death that a snapped wire-rope carries. Lavel would have fled this with certainty. But Franklin had taught himself another creed. The force that drove the ridge downward gave to the force that levered up the bar with cracking shoulder and chest muscles. The shoe rose with a sucking squeak, and slid forward, ploughing a furrow twice her height out of the bog. Franklin dripped in heat and utter exhaustion, and mud smeared him to the breast. The strain had shaken his whole body to weakness, but he followed doggedly where the shoe led, and baulked her belated attempt to fall over a bank.

The humour had gone out of this thing, but some peace came back along the level bracken

hilltop spread with clear gold of the morning. Across the wide valley that fell to his right reared the uttermost peaks of snow. Up from the left roared the thump of the blasting battery. Cornell was down there somewhere, but Franklin must pass by savage ways to meet him. Not any man should say that he burked, but his wind was giving under the strain and the constant stoop to the bar.

Through the crushed green-grey of manuka the shoe shuffled merrily to the edge of the world, and went over to plumb the gully below. It is customary to take logs down a face with slacked rope and a drag. Franklin remembered this as he held to the tail of a comet that fled over greasy clay, beaded wetly, at an angle of fifty-five. The bottom raced up to meet him, and the shoe burrowed in the softness of it like a homing rabbit. No man of less than Franklin's thews could have raised her in time. But he lay flat after it, and saw sky and rolling hills turn black. Then he rose giddily, and chased the unwieldy beast where she waddled through a swampy creek and the rushes beyond. Cornell was getting his money's worth, if he could but know it.

The shoe pawed at the steep slope where the rope led, and Franklin steered her to the track as the logs dropped back to the stretch of the grips with a groan. There was bound to be trouble now. For to make this upward game possible the engine-driver must play the shoe as a fisherman plays a salmon. And this thing took the way without

sense or heed, tugging blindly. Franklin scrambled beside; snatching at sticks, tufts of broom, and rock points; clearing to right and left such dangers as he might, with ready hand and foot, and labouring in his breath after the manner of a wounded bull. The sweat ran off him, and the incessant clear call of a tui somewhere back in the dense greens maddened him—because he knew that Cornell had assuredly the upper hand.

A miri stump raised its black head in the track-centre. Franklin climbed with his reaching bar in all the agility of a very blasphemous monkey. But the shoe made better headway, took the stump full, and clave to it. Franklin spoke to her as if she had been a creature full of vicious life, and she seemed to understand, and kicked joyously. The whistle was a child's plaything. He cast it away with an oath. Then he laid to the work with his foot blocked by a tree-root and his shoulder braced against the left front of the logs.

Should the shoe swing by ever so little the way might pull it round. Should it not—— It did not, and Franklin dropped at the crack, which thinned to a venomous hiss when the broken rope curled overhead.

The shoe went to the bottom without hesitation, bearing a flying tail of ropes and a derisive clatter of iron. Here she spilt the logs and smashed both grips.

But Franklin got up, and slung forward with his hands shut up. He had that to say to Cornell which would not wait. The rope wriggled away

before him as a snake moves, and its inanity fed his wrath. In due time the tail of it wound triumphantly into the engine-drum, and Franklin followed round to the tender with the gay sunlight over his bare hairy chest and arms and over the murder on his forehead. A scared, beardless face peeped between the cocks.

“Oh, give us a hand, Franklin. There’s suthin’ wrong here. D’yer know——”

Franklin lifted the boy out with a mighty grip.

“Whaur’s Cornell?”

“Didn’t come hup this mornin’. Brant’s sick, an’ Cornell ’ad ter go inter the mill. I reckoned as ’ow I cud manage, but a lever’s jammed or suthin’, an’ these beggars don’t know nothin’. I say——”

Franklin dropped him, and walked away with his hands very deep in his trouser-pockets. For he knew that he must kill if he touched at all. And the treble voice shrilled behind him——

“I say, Franklin. The rope’s broke. Did yer know?”

IN TINLAY'S WHARÈ.

“The dead man told it to the dead,
And he wrote down the tale;
But life is blind to what They find
Who move behind the veil.

‘Perhaps,’ and ‘if,’ and ‘might-have-been’;
The lights by which we read
The naked truth full told in sooth
By dead unto the dead.”

THIS is not at all explained. It is Tinlay's business, strictly. But Tinlay passed, untelling, and it fell to Clint to pick up the ravelled ends.

Tinlay was shepherd to Lane in a log hut set in the bush thirty miles from the homestead. He watched the saddle that made boundary of the low hills, and when the sheep fed afar he employed himself how he might. Once he employed himself in dying, and a stray swagger gave the word to Mindoorie at a considerably later date.

This does not matter, for Tinlay was forgotten in a fortnight; partly because it is well known that the milestones for the guidance of the men of to-morrow must be quarried from the bones of the men of to-day, and partly because out-back

these milestones carry only such records as may be of use to the next man, and are not in the least of epitaph construction.

Clint was the next man. He went up the day after what had been Tinlay came to final anchor on the little hill behind the township; found the mobs shoulder-deep in rank gullies, and chasing the full feed still lower on the hills; raked out the dead ash left by Tinlay in the chimney-place, and slung his billy from the hook. Then he straightened slowly, being stiff from long hours in the saddle, and looked to what needed next.

The bunk was bare to its wooden slats, for there were reasons why the mattress went away with Tinlay.

"Wonder what Muggins 'd say ter this," he growled, and crawled out to pull bracken—heaps of bracken, for he was a soft sleeper—in the great pillared corridors, always gloomy and always sounding like organ-pipes at moving of the wind in the tops.

But when the fern was spread, and the grey blankets over, and the firelight ran into all the wharè corners, a restlessness caught Clint, so that he overhauled carefully the nine-by-twelve space that had held Tinlay's private life.

Such outposts as these tell more of a man than his tongue or his face will give. Besides, it is decreed that each soul must influence other souls directly or indirectly. This was why the personality of Tinlay became blatantly real to Clint very presently.

Tinlay had been a neat man. Clint approved of the folding chairs and camp table, and the shelves where some odd books lay dusty among candles and string, and fifty-one things more. The books did not interest Clint. They were what he called "bally rhymin'-rot." No more did he care for the thumb-nail sketches crowded on the smoked walls.

"Sheep feedin'," he said, standing before them, and sucking his pipe in pure puzzlement. "An' a robin on th' choppin'-block outside, an' a beastly blowy night wi' a wet moon. The on'y wharè on the beat what ain't got a coloured picter from the township. Tinlay 'd a rat, sure 'nuff."

Next, he fished out Tinlay's diary from between the top log and the sheet-iron roof, and frilled the pages over in his hand by the red of the sunset.

It was scrawled in indelible pencil, and there were copious stretches in Hebrew, or something equally like barb-wire.

"Tommy-rot," said Clint; and, there being no known person on the face of all the earth who wanted aught to remember Tinlay by, he stuffed the whole thing under the sputtering billy.

Before he left the wharè he would have given more than he had, and more, to have that book back in his hands. For it might have told of The Faces.

The first face he found in the corner by the bunk-head. Tinlay's pet weka was killing a rat all over the room; and when the twain began to bleed

into Clint's swag he chased them out, falling over the face in the doing of it.

He carried it back to the fireplace; squatted in the glow; turned it as the light fell this way and that. He smoked three pipes for the good of his nerves, and said, very much more than once, "Did Tinlay do it, or ole Nick?"

It was the face of incarnate dread. This was most certain. After, it might be seen that it was the face of a man; young, by the full temples and clean chin, and roughed with vigorous power from a rich, cheesy heart of totara, ten-by-eight-by-five-and-a-half. The head was flung back, so that the neck muscles stood out; the lips were tight on the teeth, and the cheeks drawn in. But it was the set seeing horror of the eyes that made the thing strenuous with a lurking life beyond the brain and hand of the workman.

"That chap's lookin' on his death, an' funkin' it," said Clint suddenly; and then shuddered because he knew that he had spoken truth.

He went to bed and slept badly, dreaming that the face hung in the air above him, and told him why it had feared death. This seemed to be because it would not play football or cricket any more. But the reason was so totally inadequate that Clint woke up laughing.

The face was quite as horrible and truthful by daylight, but the bridge of the nose and one nostril were unfinished. Thereby Clint took sufficient comfort to unclasp his knife for the smoothing. For most bushmen can do all things with their

fingers. Five minutes he sat, weakening. Then he dropped the knife back, unfleshed, climbed a stool, and thrust the face to the hind corner of the topmost shelf, beyond bottles and empty match-boxes.

"Uncanny," he said. "That's what it is. Tinlay was a genius if he chopped it out, but he must a-bin dotty too. An' he never did it out o' his head."

This night Clint saw the second face. He turned in the strait bunk that Tinlay had mistaken for a coffin, and saw it on the floor. The door was ajar, and the moonlight washed through in a flood; and the shadow of a face fell black on the white. But only the tree-boles showed faintly beyond when Clint looked for the man who cast that shadow, and only the tree-tops whispered together in the silence which is not peaceful, but restless with a thin, ghostly life. Clint looked again at the face. It was profile, and indistinct, especially about the back of the head. Sleepily he fancied that he had seen the thing before. Then he murmured—

"Bloomin' shadder in a bunch o' leaves. I'll be seein' faces in the billy nex'. An' I'll light the fire wi' that ole heathen o' Tinlay's ter-morrer."

He took the face down at midday, and, happening to hold it sideways, sat suddenly, and did not feel at all well. For, allowing that the one face showed all fear, and the other the short upper lip of easy contempt, this was that which Clint had seen as a puddle of ink on the floor.

But the men of the back-country need not to

have coward blood in their hearts. Clint shook himself, and went out from the bush to the free, windy hillside. There he said defiantly to his dogs—

“Simple thing, in course. Branches makes a shadder on the floor, an’ Tinlay carves the shadder. The lay o’ the moonlight alters the expression—an’ that’s all there is to’t. Blest if I don’t worry that nose out from the ole shadder myself.”

He felt brave as a man may be when he laid block and knife in the bunk beside him. He began to sweat a little when the shadow dropped sudden and vivid in the white line. It was cruelly real, and the pupil of the eye fixed on the block in Clint’s hand. Clint swore to this later, and no one could possibly contradict him. He sat quite still, watching; and when another shade moved over the door-sill his eyes burnt in his head with a sudden awful dread.

It was Tinlay’s weka that came with its shadow before it, and heard Clint making incoherent prayer and breaking into laughter of relief. For a weka is above all things companion to lonely men, by reason of its knowledge that the heavy, powerful mystery of the bush is really just a delicate and transparent joke. And this gives the human much confidence.

It gave Clint confidence to watch the forward glide of the bird until its ochre-tipped brown feathers should darken in the unexplainable shadow. He watched. The weka stepped on, head low, spurred feet and wings mincing. It walked into the shadow, blotting the outline with its own, and

passed, untouched in its lightest feather by the face, to the chimney-place.

Clint had not known that this Thing was a horror before. He knew it now, rolling in his bunk and biting his fingers; his eyes drawn still while the moon lasted to that face that mocked his fear and was cast by no light of earth.

He fought a little battle between his pride and his lawful alarm in the sunny space about the chopping-block, while the weka ran down into the thick undergrowth many times with scraps of chops and damper for his family. There were two things to be regarded. If he went back and said that he was frightened by a shadow it would not be very easy to live on Mindoorie after. If he stayed, and that Thing turned to what Tinlay had seen, he would go mad. Quite probably Tinlay had gone mad before his death. Clint wished he had kept that blue-backed diary, that he might know for truth.

Three days he cooked and pottered about the wharè. Three nights he slept in a wild fern gully where glow-worms climbed in ghastly gleams to meet the stars. On the fourth night came rain in ruled lines that caused Clint to burk the soaked fern and crouch over the fire with his dogs. The night was darker than coal in a pit, and therefore no shadow could lie.

"If it was Lavel or Muggins they'd a-guv it best long ago," he said in his conceit; turned, and saw the face floating on the floor in that strip of white that did not shine through the shut door.

This put the roof on the horror unequivocally. It is not wise to ask Clint anything concerning that night; but it is believed on Mindoorie that he passed it with stopped ears, and face hidden against the soft warmness of his dogs.

He rode back at daybreak, carrying his terror in his face and a carved lump of totara in his swag on the saddle-bow. He walked into the wharè as the boys sat at tea, unrolled his blankets, and tossed the face with a bump on the table between Walt's plate and Jack's.

"I come back," he said, "'cause that devil is castin' his reflection all over the wharè, an' I don't like it. Burn him, you chaps. I tried, and I couldn't wi' the other face watchin'. Chop him up. But I couldn't do that nuther."

Walt was holding the virile staring face in shaking hands.

"It's de Carteret," he said unsteadily. "Reggie de Carteret 't got bushed somewheres up there seven year ago 'n was never picked up. Lord! *what* is it? Good Lord! what made him look that way?"

"Seein' his death," cried Clint hysterically, and tumbled over among the plates and pannikins.

They won explanation from him later. But it did not clear matters at all.

"Twenty chaps hev put in th' season there since Carteret pegged out," said Walt. "An' why should he show on'y t' Tinlay? 'N why show lookin' like that? Clint, ye're lucky y' didn't hev this thing knockin' roun' yer bed. How did

Tinlay stan' 't t' carve it? How the land did he?"

"Tinlay saw more than you, Clint," said Harry gravely. "No man ever cut those sucked-in cheeks and bared teeth from a black flat shadow. That is, if Tinlay did do it, and not the devil."

"Tinlay did it," said Clint. "Don't ask me how I know, fur I can't tell yer. But he did it. An' it's a message by the hand o' one dead man from another dead man. An' blowed ef I likes bein' mixed up in it."

But the shadow never showed there again. And so the true connection of de Carteret and Tinlay and the bush wharè belongs to the things that are not told.

But once in the mustering season Harry's dog gnawed on a human rib-bone in the glow-worm gully, and the boys buried the bone with reverence.

TRUCKS.

“Twisting the tail of a roaring mob,
Plunking the stuff on the field,
Fighting the bush-fire, or ‘besting’ a nob,
Rollicking home on the station cob—
All pleasures that Life will yield
To me—
I’ll take to the full all she gives to me,
And pay when the line is reeled.”

THERE were thirteen men on the siding platform. They had been there, more or less, for the last ten evenings when the branch-line train went by. At the beginning they patiently and suavely demanded of the guard, the stoker, and the engine-driver adequate reasons as to why grain-trucks had not come up as ordered. Later, they put the matter differently; but it was after Harry Morel had threatened to tie Sandy to his own cow-catcher, and go gathering trucks himself all up and down the line, that Sandy passed Linnear Siding full steam, and—by popular tradition—skulked in the van with Towse and the stoker.

Harry Morel was working-manager for Jeydon on the Canterbury Plains at this time. For which reason he came to make the fourteenth man on the station, and clattered up the boarding to locate

Carre by the light of the pipe on his nose-tip. Carre always smoked a stub.

The life of a new excitement tingled him at touch of the first shadow that he fell over, and he bit off the eternal catch-word, "Any trucks yet?" to grab Peters by the elbow.

"What's up, Pete? Not trucks really?"

"No such luck, I'm afraid." Peters came with him, step for step. "No; it's the Traffic Manager. Going up to the terminus for a constitutional. We're just waiting to give him a cheer. He'll be along in about five minutes."

"Now what does he mean by that?" Harry backed up to the ten-by-six station-house, shouldering Carre and little Denis Morant. "He's a cheeky old gentleman, I don't think—comin' along this line just now. Does he want to know what the gentle and bovine farmer feels like with his grain blocked at every siding, and Government usin' his legitimate trucks for excursion portorage? All serene. We'll show him. It's scandalous, of course. 'Wish we'd had time to let some more chaps know. 'Could have given him a ripping surprise-party."

"We would so," purred Denis, and Carre said—

"My boss is going off his head over it, I think. Rushes down to Christchurch four days a week, and raises Cain generally. What's yours do, Harry?"

"Pitches in letters—private, public, and personal—'specially personal. I left him at his sixteenth. It's no earthly good, either. They

must get pecks of 'em at the head office every morning."

Peters ran a farm in his own right, but he took no pride in it just now.

His oats were booked to sail per s.s. *Ionic* in two days, and he saw no possible hope of fulfilling his contract.

The Government laid the blame on the wet season, which had caused farmers to rush their grain precipitately, thereby creating a block at the main, and the consequent clogging of every separate wayside artery. The farmers laid the blame on everybody and everything — very often with justice. And the grain sat in great square masses on each siding that tapped the plain, and got wet owing to a shortage of tarpaulins.

Peters spoke with his teeth clinched on his pipe.

"Faulkner's inclined to be nasty. Missed three boats already, and he'll forfeit if he can't get his stuff away this week. You freeze on to him when she comes by, Harry. We don't want any stone-throwing or pot-shooting."

"Don't we? My Saint Peter, we do! That's just where you make the mistake. Hillo, Marton. 'Been slating 'em down at headquarters again?"

Marton worked his thousand acres with his three sons and a brother, and he had grown stooped in the serving of it.

"Yes," he said eagerly. "Told 'em my stuff wuz booked fur shipment on Sat'd'y an' I must git it off to onest. That wuz right, eh, eh?"

"Quite right. We all say that, of course. Blayne will begin to drop to it directly. Hope you didn't say the *Suffolk*, Marton. 'Bout forty of us have plunked for her already. She'd be sunk long ago if she'd tried to load the half of it."

"I knowed that," said Marton, in pride. "So I just mentioned the *Wakanui*. That wuz right, eh? Nobody's got her, hev they?"

Harry spoke softly, for the seven who heard grinned without explanation.

"No, my dear chap. P'r'aps they haven't. And p'r'aps you've forgotten that she went down off the Hen and Chickens about a year ago? Yes; I thought so. One does forget these little things. But I'm afraid you've rather bust the show up now, Marton. The Government will begin to think we're all lying. So we are—the bulk of us, anyway. But they're not supposed to know it. Jove! there's the head-light swelling. Close up, you fellows."

Greet slouched across to Denis Morant. He knew that the two brothers had about five thousand bushels on that platform.

"I sneaked four tarpaulins out o' them trucks as went up ter Gatefield larst night," he said. "I'd 'a sneaked the trucks too, on'y Sandy didn't more 'n slow down ter let a swaggie off. There's a big josser at Gatefield—*Hunt*, I s'pose. He gits what he wants. Yer kin have two o' them tearpaulin, sir, ef yer like. Your grain's bin out longer than mine."

"Thanks awfully." Two tarpaulins would have

been about as useful as a handkerchief to Denis. "I expect the top bags are wet already, though. I'll have to let it slide. Right, Harry. What's the word? What?"

The Traffic Manager was an easy man, and not over bold. He had come from his city office, where rude letters were put in the waste-paper basket, to find out—comfortably, and from the cushioned seat of a railway carriage—what possible reason men could have for writing such letters. And that night was to him one of pure terror.

Seven branch-line stations out of nine seethed with shouting maniacs, half-seen and horrible in the frail light, fierce-voiced, and demanding trucks—trucks—trucks. He showed his mild-whiskered head at one siding, and said—

"My good men, do you suppose I carry trucks in my portmanteau?" But he had all the shutters up before Sandy whistled the next warning.

So it was that Harry, leading vituperation in the forefront, drew blank, and swore earnestly as the tail-lights wriggled out in the night.

"Gone to earth right enough, the old fox. Well?"

It was presumably Faulkner going mad with celerity. He waved a scrap of paper tossed from a rear carriage.

"He chucked it—Jim Frost as was aboard. He says as how they've left trucks—scores of trucks—at Maranui. For Swayne, of course, Swayne's selling to Plout."

Plout was in the Government secrets. So rumour said.

"There's something rotten in the State of Denmark." Carre shrugged his shoulders. "No good waiting here any longer. I'll make home and get asked if I've nabbed any trucks. 'Boss is given to repetition. Coming along, Harry?"

"Will you dry up?" Harry's eyes were contracted, and he whistled softly behind shut teeth—both war-signals to those who knew. "Maranui's a bare three miles, isn't it? And only Hollis and Swayne cart there. Swayne won't bother to set a watch. What's the grade? One in sixty? Ah! How many of you fellows can bring up your cart-horses in less 'n half an hour?"

There was one minute of deep-breathed silence. Then young Pat Freer flung himself across his saddle, and bolted off, shouting—

"I'll bring four—and hauling tackle."

"And I can get six," said Carre. "Thank Heaven we're ploughing at this end."

"Leadin' chains—with hooks. Carre, you are a worthy man. Greet——"

But Greet had gone, and Smith had gone. The rest lived too far away.

Peters hesitated.

"I suppose Swayne will be all right. Plout's backing him. But——"

"Don't care whether Swayne's all right or not." Harry was tightening his girths with precision. "We're going to be all right. That's the main point. I say, you chaps! Get a move on

We'll need to do some shunting 'fore the others come along."

It was a gloomy, low-clouded night, with a slight scud to chill the body; and the flying column rode down to the attack with a few qualms and a great deal of joy. Swayne—being a creature of Plout's—was an outcast, and deserved evil. Therefore, there was a moral lesson attached to this thing also. Harry explained it all to Peters, whose strenuous desire could not blind him to the ethics of the matter.

A splatter of mud chased them between the banked-up line and the straight gorse fence, and in the drizzle that blew up out of the dark south it would have been sufficient for one slip on the greasy going to pile horses and men very promptly. But it was only Sheehan thought of this, and he was too utterly scared to say so.

"Steady on, there," shouted Harry, wrenching at his mare's head; and a blacker bank rose out of the blackness to rightward.

A sudden ripple of matchlight washed weakly against the sides of the great galleons that curved like a beautiful new moon from end to end of the shunt-line and gave back a steely twinkle. Denis ran nosing amongst them, and flung about the truth that each man was discovering for himself.

"Twenty-five, I tell you. Twenty-five galopshus, full-bodied, double chaps. L. A.'s, the whole ging-bang of 'em, I absolutely believe. And won't there be wigs on the green to-morrow?"

"My word, it's jest a little bit o' all right." This was Craig. And then he growled at a couple of five-ton low-siders.

Silently, and with stern intent, the little army attacked truck after truck. They eased the strain, that the stolid, unwieldy things might be uncoupled. They laid their hands to the wheels, or their shoulders to the hinder parts, or they grappled the fore-chains about their bodies, and pulled. Their dug-in heels slipped in the wet gravel, and the chill of the flanged wheels flayed their fingers. But, by inch and inch, by foot and foot, with the gathering way to help, the trucks were forced over the points where Harry commanded, and ranged—properly spaced—for the haulage.

Freer brought his four down at a hand-gallop, with clanking chains and ponderous thunder of hooves. To the great seven-and-a-half waggon that waited they were joined with a blessing, and sent forward. And Smith, with his three full teams, roared up on the heels of Greet and Carre.

Then began a long procession that trailed, like a hunting snake, through the driving mist of the night. The horses stumbled on the wind-swept sleepers, and—where a pinch came suddenly steep—the men, of necessity, pushed behind. But, for the most part, they attended jealously to the matter in hand, and kept the exactitude of a tape-measure between bit and truck-tail.

Harry drove that night a wilder team than ever before, when he harnessed some of the hacks

to the rearmost truck by belts and odd chains and fencing-wire. Carre grinned to hear the clatter directly behind him, when the five of them ran pig-headedly amok, and tangled much of the gear into a hard knot before they lay down and squealed.

But Harry discarded help in a curt and pointed speech at those who would take his pleasure from him, and brought in his truck triumphant, not a quarter-mile after Carre's.

Except for the little matter of Swayne (who assuredly could not expect to count), the farmers of the plains were, of custom, unhesitatingly generous one to another. This is a thing too well understood for comment among men who live the free life of the country. For where all lie under the same blessing and the same curse, help in time of need is naturally given and taken with simple promptitude.

Faulkner's whole line must go, undoubtedly. That would be—approximately—eight L. A.'s. And Peters' also—which totalled up to fifteen.

"Thank the Lord, oats is lighter loadin'," muttered Greet, grabbing backward for the ears of the sack.

Smith had ordered out every man on his place, and Carre's ploughmen were there, and the three odd-jobbers who helped Freer work his little lot. They toiled like fiends, man and master, through the bitterness of the night—loading, eternally loading, in a nightmare that grew more cruel as the strain gripped into them.

Little Denis Morant fell out first, in a condition of wrathful collapse. Then Carre gave way, and after him another. But still the filled trucks were shunted slowly downward, and coupled for Sandy to take on in the morning. The thought of this was a clean and abiding joy, and helped them immensely.

Slade put in a word for young Sherriff.

"He's got no more 'n 'ud fill one o' the big trucks, 'n a single. But it's prime millin' wheat booked ter Cotton, an' he's goin' fair ratty over it. He's wantin' the money, yer know. 'Wife's sick. That's why he ain't here ter-night. Give him his show 'stead o' me."

"And I'll anti up the low-sider," said Harry handsomely. "I'll have to tell the boss I fought you for the lot, you know, or he'll chuck me out. Don't leave him one, you chaps. Miserly old beast."

It was not so that Harry spoke of Lane in the Mindoorie days; but he was ever unregenerate.

"Hope Swayne won't be annoyed," said Carre, looking down the wet metals in the dull of a grey dawning. "Verily he will make complaint to the gentleman of Traffic, and verily the gentleman will talk to Sandy. I think things are going to be a leetle bit hot for Sandy and Co."

"P'r'aps it will be as well to bunk before the train comes down," Peters returned from a gloat over his fat truckfuls. "If Sandy or Towse get into a row we must back 'em up, of course. But it's been a rorty piece of work. Harry, you

beggar, you've saved my bacon this time, right enough."

"If you give me away," said Harry to the assembled company, "I'll lay information against the whole boiling of you. Remember that. I've got my own reputation to consider. So-long."

He lifted himself stiffly to the saddle, and trotted off home.

And the wet, aching knot on the siding melted away with swiftness, so that there remained only the trucks to give explanation to Sandy and his satellites when the morning train came down.

IN THE DOWN-COUNTRY.

“Little God Love; where the dawn winds blow
On fold after fold of the distant ranges;
What did you there to trouble me so—
Were the towns not enough with their light-heart changes?
You hurt; and the reason is hard to prove.
Why did you trouble me, Little God Love?”

“IT 'LL be jest an or'nary sod wharè.”

“But you made it, dearest.”

“And you won't have no folk anywheres near yer.”

“I'll have you.”

“'Fraid I'm jest an or'nary sort of chap, Liza.”

Then she put her arms round him, and told him what he was among men, exactly as all lovers have told all lovers since love began. But Lavel drew her head back and looked at her, troubled, and marvelling that so small and rare a thing could in sooth be his very own.

“Yer don't know the life of a woman out-back. Are yer sure yer won't p'r'aps be sorry—after?”

“Not unless—you forget to love me.”

“Never. I'll never do that, Liza.”

He kissed her as a man unaccustomed to tenderness, and went away to ride through the noise of

the streets, through the silence of range and level and barren down to the home that he had built her. It stood on a new-leased Government block, and Franklin had helped in the making, as Franklin had helped Lavel in all things since they two first were mates.

At earliest hearing Franklin had hated this unknown girl who was to break the tie between them.

In learning more he began to fear her. Liza was bred in the town, and nursed on the talk of the dressmaking rooms at a big shop. Lavel was bred in the back-country, and had taken his teaching from men in bush-townships, and on the roads. The very trick-words of lip and brain which foreshadow the whole must of necessity be separate languages in the man and the woman. And this was but as the beginning. A man who would live on the land needs a helpmate in kind; sturdy, expecting little, ready always and uncomplainingly to bear up her end of the burden. And the burden will be heavy. Wherefore Franklin pulled his beard and growled while they wrought at the two-roomed wharè until it stood up in all its ugliness among the tussock hills.

"Gie her comforts for the Lord's sake," he said then. "A wife's a cheepin' thing else, an' she'll dither the life out o' ye. But I jalouse she wull dae that onyways."

And just then Liza, walking with a new consciousness among the workroom girls, blushed at their twitter of lace-trimmings and underskirts and all

else that by right belongs to a bride, and thanked God dumbly for love.

But Franklin could not guess at this, and it was for Lavel's sake alone that a sheet-iron lean-to was sloped to the hinder end of the wharè, and a handful of tiger-lilies stuck in a scarified patch of soil. Then Lavel rested from his labour in a florid content, saying—

“Reckon that's good enough for the Princess o' Wales. Now we'll wade in at the fencin', for I must hev the stockin' done wi' by next month. S'elp me bob, but it's fair rotten to hev to take the inside o' a week gittin' spliced.”

It was into the golden land of love and desire that he brought Liza home through the sunseting. For the scarped ranges and the marshes were passed, and all the world lay forward in a broad flooded yellow on tussock slopes and plumes of waving snow-grass. The little squat wharè shared in the benediction, and a skylark sent them welcome down from God's gate. Liza laid her cheek to the rough, unplanned door, and named her home “Heaven-on-Earth,” speaking very softly, yet not so softly but that Lavel heard.

“You've got some ratty ideas, old girl,” he said. But he put his arm about her closely as they went in together.

Franklin rode over on the Sunday. And he found that Lavel had married a child with a cotton frock and eyes made glorious by a something that he did not understand, and wrists no bigger than the waist of his thumb. Lavel showed them in

half-pride and half-derision, and Liza's sweet lip drooped.

"I can work," she said eagerly. "Truly I can. I am so strong—and there is very much to do."

"Ay," said Franklin, looking down on her gravely. "There is much tae dae."

"It is so wonderful that I should be allowed to help him." This very shyly. "He is so good to me. You can never guess how good he is—for you are not his wife."

"I've been regruttin' that a' these years," said Franklin solemnly; "but, ye see, he didna ask me."

Then they laughed together until Liza ran into the house in a small fury. But she waved a cup at them in forgiveness when they passed the kitchen window, and Franklin growled through his beard—

"She's a bonny bit thing, Lavel mon. Think ye ye hae dune richt tae bring her oot tae this."

"Pooh," said Lavel, "she'll be happy enough. A feller can't make this sort of thing pay without a wife, you know. And she's dead gone on me. Macklin sent over those Leicesters yesterday. Come along down to the paddock an' have a look at them."

"Ay," said Franklin, underbreath, "she's a bonny bit thing, but I doot she's the mate for ye, ma lad."

For if Franklin knew the good in Lavel he knew distinctly the evil too.

There was a whole new life calling for Liza, and she went to the learning bravely. It was play at

first, with Lavel to carry the heavy buckets and tins, and to help in the washing-up at nights. But this failed to attract him presently, and the outside work taxed his mental and physical strength, and began to rub his temper. Liza struggled over strange dishes that Lavel refused to eat, and learnt to milk the cows, and feed the pigs, and to fill the kettles without flooding the stove-place. For the work of a woman on the land is always that of a man. It tried her severely; and the long evenings that closed the hard days were cruelly dull, with Lavel falling asleep over his pipe, and the clucking wind arguing through the door-latch with the busy clock on the mantel-shelf.

It was in the fourth week that she first spoke to him in anger. It was in the seventh week that he first swore at her. They made that up; he with uncouth regret, she with tears that washed some of the gold out of life for always.

Then Franklin came. He noticed the swelled eyelids, and the loss of spring in the little thin figure; and he called Lavel to account sharply, even savagely, down by the pigsties among the manuka. Lavel was handling a terrified pigling. He dropped it, and his low brows met in a scowl.

"She played up, an' I guv it to her straight. An' I'll do it agin when she wants it. Don't you come gassin' about my business that way, Franklin, for I'm blowed if I'll stand it."

And by this it was intimated that Lavel was ashamed, and afraid to show it.

This was a strait life for the two out on the

tussock hills, and one that demanded and took all they could give. But they gave apart, not knowing, and this was unwise, for it hurt both more than was necessary.

Every little sordid detail of housework was Liza's, day by day, with no relief and no rest. She lost flesh and spirit, and the loneliness of the many hours ate into her like a canker. Lavel tramped at the plough-tail, flayed his fingers over the straining of wires, sunk post-holes, and built hurdles. And the eternal dread that sufficient money might not always be forthcoming kept him awake through the nights. This is one of the privileges which a poor man pays for a home and a wife.

Franklin came very often, for Lavel wearied for one of his kind to speak with. He forgot that the only woman within twenty miles lived at the end of a bridle-track, and Liza could not ride. She sat by, and listened to the drone of rape and ensilage and half-breeds, and much more that was an unknown tongue, and one that Lavel would not teach her.

He forgot, also, the little tender pettings that a woman craves; and so it came about that Liza broke her heart daily, never guessing that Lavel was hiding from her all that he considered a man's trouble. She did not know of the seed-land that had gone before the wind even to the bottom of the ploughing, of the cattle that broke out and died of tutu down on the river-bed, of the merinos that got foot-rot in the swamp. But the constant

pressing of this burden weighted Lavel beyond his strength, and, being quite an ordinary man, he made himself consistently objectionable in consequence.

Liza had learnt little refinements in the work-rooms; and so it fell that by degrees the filthiness of the cow-house in rain, the smell of Lavel's boots when he came from the yards, even the hang of his coat on the shoulders that were growing bowed, were of offence to her. The tussock that blew to west, to east, to southward on the bleak hills was a thing, merciless and all-abiding, to hold her from the life she had known and loved.

It was before Franklin one day that Lavel railed unguarded because Liza had forgotten to feed the calf. And that Franklin, awkward and troubled, should plead for her clumsily, was gall beyond anything that Liza had been called to bear yet.

"He's quite right," she said, with her head up. "I didn't ought to forget."

Then she went out, and beat her hands wildly on the staring blank wall that she had named "Heaven-on-Earth," and cast herself down in the hollow of the manuka hill with all love shaken out of her by that struggle against the unalterable which comes to most men and women soon or late, and which—while it lasts—makes life rather more terrible than it is meant to be.

Franklin was fighting a devil on his own account these days, and his pipe lost flavour. The changes that flecked Liza's voice; the scent

she always used; the quaint upstanding wave of hair on the left temple—over well he knew them. All memories of Lavel's wife were a torture to him; but belief in his strength of will drove him back to her week by week, until autumn chilled to winter with threatening of the snow that would presently cut the sod wharè off from all the world. Then it would be that Lavel and Liza must go back to the state of the first man and his wife, with none to come between. Franklin feared what this might mean when he rode through the bleak wind one Sunday and found Liza alone by the fire with the new face that dragged at his heart-strings.

"I'll make you some tea," she said dully. "George is out round the sheep. He won't be in for hours, I expect."

She moved through the room that she had made dainty with sewed curtains, and shining tinware, and books; and Franklin watched her under his hand—such looks as a man may give who, being without the pale, sees that thing of his desire broken before his eyes.

"Ye're lukin' fair an' peeked, lassie. This weather no suits ye, maybe?"

"It's not the weather," said Liza, and laughed uncertainly. For her nerves were on tension beyond her knowing.

She moved the kettle in the red of the fire-light, and Franklin cried out at the shapely seamstress' fingers that were chapped to bleeding and blackened with work.

"Eh, lassie! What hae ye dune tae yer honds? Swelled an' bluidy—the saft bit fingers! Ye'll no' be pullin' aff that ring the noo."

"No, I suppose not," she said, And then constraint fell from her, and she frightened Franklin.

"Why did you tell me that? Do you think I don't know? Do you think I don't know I can't pull it off? Never! Never! So long as we both shall live. Oh, I can't bear it! O God, I can't bear it! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

She clung with both hands to the breast of his coat, and in the mad words that she said Franklin fancied she was stripping her whole soul bare to him. The quick tones carried him down on the rush, and the nearness of her piteous mouth was more torture than is healthful for any man.

"You were his mate once. Was ever he cruel to you? But I am his wife. He can do what he likes to me. Oh, if you had a wife, would you hit her—and call her names——"

"What? Na—he wudna strike ye."

"He did! He did! Twice. Once I left the gate open and boxed some sheep. Once I was tired, and answered him back. And he'll do it again. I know he will. Oh! why doesn't he love me as he used to?"

This should have cleared the position to Franklin's understanding. It did not, for other forces were at work.

"Take me away." This was not any more Liza, the dressmaker, with her careful mannerisms, but

a woman caught in a power too strong for her. "I'll kill him if I stop here. I'm learnin' to hate him now. Oh, if you care for me, take me away! I won't stop here—wi' him."

"If I care!" He kept his eyes from her because that touch on his breast was quite all that he could bear. "Fine ye ken that I care. Tak' yer bit honds aff me, lassie, or I'll be showin' ye that I—care tae much."

"Do you? Do you care? He doesn't. He never will any more. Every day and every night I know that he never will. If I could die——"

"God hae maircy—ma lassie—ma ain lassie! What can I dae? What can I dae?"

Liza had whipped herself into pure madness. And because Franklin did not know that the mood would pass, his thews were being tested severely.

"Take me away! Take me where he can't find me! You're strong. You wouldn't let him have me back——"

"He's ma mate. He is ma mate, I tell ye. I canna dae him wrang. Ye dinna ken what ye say. He is ma mate."

"Don't I know? Don't I?" Her hands gripped him closer. "Oh, don't let us be shut up here together—just him an' me!"

Franklin cried out inarticulately, and almost his strength went from him. But he did not move. He stared blindly at the wall, and two memories came to him in great lightning flashes: Lavel standing just there with a dripping brush, his eager face and fair hair all splattered with

whitewash ; Lavel, in pride and a half-comic tenderness, arranging the next room, and puzzling over the hang of a curtain. He pushed Liza away.

"Dinna tempt me," he said. "For the luve o' God, dinna tempt me! He's hurtin' ye sair, an' I luve ye abune a'. But I canna help ye. I canna."

He dropped his head on the mantel-shelf, and groaned like a wounded elephant; and presently he heard her crying, as a man cries, in great dry sobs that shake the soul.

He swung round.

"Liza!" he said, and put his honour behind him when he crossed the room to take her up in his arms.

Through the window above her bent head he saw Lavel riding home across the distant snow-grass, and his hands fell away as they touched her. There was a silence that drew together all known agony for one man; but Franklin's voice was quite level when he spoke.

"Rise ye oop, lassie. Here's yer mon come hame. He does luve ye richt weel, though I'll no' say he's ower gleg in the showin' o't. But he has a mony things tae trouble him, an' ye maun forgie, an' luve him yet. Ye air aye the ane lassie for him. I'll no' wait tae see him, I'm thinkin'. Gude-bye—Liza."

Out in the windy dusk he twisted in the saddle, looking back to the foursquare hut with its litter of yards and straw-thatched sheds. Past the straight wire fence running down where the young

trees bent from the south he saw Lavel go in, and shut the house door behind. Then he turned, pressing his eyes with his hands, and his horse went home unguided.

He carried a very complete heartache north with him that week, forgetting Liza every hour of the twenty-four because it was his duty, and rolling on his bed of nights in a cold fear lest Liza had run away from Lavel into the show of the ranges.

"But it's no' for me tae pit straucht," he said, many, many times. "It's no' for me."

In the late autumn the will of the man he served sent him again to the down-country. He came with a draft of cattle, and at one of the stages they told him to make Lavel's stock-yards at the day's ending. He had not heard Lavel's name since he took that old trail last-year, but his tongue dried in his mouth when he would have asked concerning Lavel's belongings. And through the long day that brought him over the last hill at sunset it is probable that Franklin paid fully for the sin of loving without the law.

The wharè, and the young trees, and the slip-rails where the cows stood lowing were swamped in the blood-red that ran out of the western sky. The window-panes flared blank, and the awful restlessness of that love which may not be satisfied made the work of rounding and yarding the mob sheer torture.

Lavel came out before the last rails were up. He was unskilful of words as in other days, but he shook hands with a mate's grip.

"It's good ter see yer agin, old man," he said. "Come along in."

Franklin followed, in deadly terror because the fear that had tortured him so long was come to the clearing. He uncovered on the threshold, and his eyes saw black. Was she there? Liza—Liza—Lavel pushed open the door of the inner room, and crossed the sill. Franklin stood still, with each dumb thing known of old punishing him remorselessly. The passion in him shook him by waves, and his throat ached. Then it came to him like the blare of a trumpet that sin, honour, blood-brotherhood between man and man are nothing beside the love of a man for a woman. He had left her—but he had come back. It was Lavel speaking behind the half-closed door, but Franklin heard only the answer.

"Franklin? Why, I thought—ah, George, just see how he's curling up his little toes! The darling—darling!"

"Hillo, sonny! Hillo, hillo! Scratch us up a good tea, Liz, will you? An' gimme the kid. I want ter show——"

"George! Don't you dare take him till I get some more clothes on to him! He'd catch his death! What? Yes, I've got plenty for tea, dear, and if it's good enough for you it's good enough for Franklin. Look! He can almost pull my hair! Oh, baby—baby——"

"And we can put him up for the night, old girl? Franklin——"

"Oh, bother Franklin!" said Liza. "All right,

dear; yes, if you want him. There! go to your daddy, my sweetheart. Keep the shawl well round his head, George, and don't let the light get in his eyes. Tell Franklin I'll be out in a minute."

And Lavel went back to tell it.

CHANGE.

“Deal me a life where a man may take
Three tricks, or I pass.
Cast the balls for a winning break,
Turn me up heads for luck’s own sake,
Give me a chance to mar or make
Three tricks, or I pass.”

TWO men, sulky and deadly weary of themselves, lay from the weather in a seven-by-nine hut, which was bedroom, kitchen, and everything else—and draughty at that. Rain roared on the sheet-iron roof, and wind tampered with the door-latch. Outside, the fires died on the half-stumped ground, and cattle lowed uneasily in the open bush along the river.

It was not a place to take flamboyant pride in. But these two had gone to some trouble to get it. Condy had come up from the south in eager resolve to make money. He met Fenton, and Fenton said, “What better than to take up half-cleared Taranaki land at nominal value; stump it, sell it for enormous profit, and keep ourselves by dairying meanwhile? The district reeks with creameries.” Only, being an uneducated man, he did not put it in quite such perfect language.

This was a year ago. Condy had learnt several things since—things that cannot be learnt second-hand. He knew the resisting powers of each totara or matai stump, when it is sound to the core and rooted straight down into hell, so that a man learns something of the place it comes from before the last fibre is up and cast on the fire. He knew how long green swampwood takes to burn. And he knew the smell of a cow-house after rain, when there is absolutely no chance of drainage.

All these things may be necessary for the welfare of a man, and Condy, being equable by nature, did not kick unduly. Then came the winter rains and a searching rheumatism, and after that Condy was quite unfit to live with.

Fenton told him so for the twentieth time. Then he yawned and looked at his watch. He was a young man with the hope of a wife, and the steady receding of the hope was making him blindly savage.

"Come on," he said, and slouched to his feet. "Ha'-past three, an' past it."

Condy dragged himself from the lower bunk with a bitten-off groan.

"Curse the cows," he said.

"Well, it's no worse fur me 'n for you," snarled Fenton, wriggling into his tattered oil-skins. "I got ter go out in it too."

"Raining still?" asked Condy absently, trying to put on a boot without bending his back.

"Rainin' like ——. Can't yer hear it?"

It was no more cruel and noisy than it had

been these last five days. But all Condyl's flesh rebelled against it fiercely.

"'Cows 'll be giving water instead of milk if we get much more of it," he said.

"They'll be givin' up," retorted Fenton savagely. "That's what they'll be doin'. An' where's our profit ter come from then, I'd like to know."

He let himself out into the bitter sleet, and Condyl followed, stumbling and blenching in the teeth of the rain.

It was the work of a hundred men more at this very hour. Condyl thought of them for one instant.

"Fools," he said. Then he fell over black logs where the carefully laid fires were all dead; splashed round the rim of a flax marsh where the uncivilised smell makes a man wish he was dead—unless his heart is high in him; squashed through the rank grass spawned from seed cast after the burning, and beat the cattle one by one from the heel of the sparse bush. He had done it at three of the clock that morning; he would do it at the same hour to-morrow. And when the rain lifted for just so little a while he must fall to the stumping again. All these things make a man thank God that he is ordained to work out his salvation with his unaided hands.

No man has written the romance of the utterly limb-weary. Condyl rough-drafted a part as he tailed the cows back. It belongs to all ages and all lives.

The bales were already filled, and Fenton clinked the milk into the bucket with a defiant squirt.

"You're mighty quick," he said over his shoulder. "'Spect me to do some of yourn, I s'pose."

Condy did not care what Fenton supposed. He took the bucket between his knees, dug his heel into the roan cow's side, and drew the milk with swift, long-fingered hands. He kept the silence of the dead until the eleventh cow dropped her tail in the bucket and cut him across the face with it. Then he kicked her—just once; but Fenton called him selected names therefor, and a wrangle grew that chafed both tempers to rawness.

The rain slung round the shed corners in the mouth of the wind, and the cattle tramped and moaned in the slush of the yard. Past the sideways glint of Condy's eye, the level naked flats rose to desolate naked hills. The loathing of it all was in Condy's nostrils, and the tickle of short 'cow-hairs down his neck near drove him mad.

He had two thoughts to put comfort into him. To one he gave voice low in his throat: "Thank Heaven I've only myself to shift for." He told Fenton of the other when they sat by the fire with tin plates on their knees, and pannikins on the floor. There was no room in that house for tables. Fenton had driven the five miles to the creamery, and the night was

evilly dark. But he was going out again to see his "girl." His heavy face was soap-bright, and his hair in an oily crest, and his thick wrists still red and greasy from the washing of buckets and cans.

"If I cleared now," said Condy, without preamble, "d'you know of anyone who could take it on, Fenton? At once, I mean?"

Fenton stared.

"Full up?"

"Pressed down and running over. Do you?"

Fenton considered, sucking the back of his knife audibly.

"What d'yer want for it? We ain't done so awful much clearin', an' half the cows 'll be dry——"

"Give me what I put into it, and I'll go to-morrow."

Fenton looked at him wide-eyed, and laid down the knife.

"You're gittin' at me," he said.

"No," said Condy wearily. "I'd get more if I put it up, of course; but it's too much fag. I'm dead sick of this life. It's never the first men who make land pay, anyhow. We lay the egg for another generation to hatch."

"That's all right," said Fenton slowly; "if t'others be yer childer."

Condy was silent a full minute. It was the whole epic of human life in seven words. He thought of the vulgar, devoted little woman of whom Fenton talked day and night, and under-

stood that to these two belonged a something he had missed. He tossed plate and pannikin into a corner, and humped his stiff back to the warmth.

"See what you can do, then," he said. "It'll pay you."

"There's my father-in-law what's to be." Fenton was considering. "He's well in—an' if I brought Sally along ter help wi' the cows——"

"Good Lord, man! You wouldn't marry the girl to put her at that!"

Fenton set wide his bovine eyes.

"She milks ten up ter home," he said, smoothing his crest and settling the slouch hat on it; "she'd sooner milk twenty wi' me. I'd knock up another couple o' rooms, o' course." He paused; then, in sudden hostility, "Why shouldn't she?"

"Oh, no reason at all, except—it seems rough on a woman."

"Sally weren't born a loafer. She'll do her whack o' graft all right. Well, I'll talk ter Pedderson, an' see."

Condy shivered as the sudden wind drove through the opened door.

"And if you don't, my man," he said to the shut blank of it, "you'll have the pleasure of burying a corpse very shortly, I promise you."

But Condy's deliverance was pledged that night.

"You call in an' see Pedderson," Fenton said. "He'll give yer the cheque on the nail. He's well in all right."

It was in a sudden love of all mankind that

Condy himself took the milk to the people across the road. By custom a child came down for it and was returned, slopping milk, and unblessed. For he had an impudent tongue. But under the watery sunlight Condy trod the mire of the road and the steep tussock hill with delight. For he was free to the world again.

A girl met him in the yard. She was plain, and already the drab of a stilted life showed on her. But her dull face changed as she took the can.

"This is good-bye," said Condy. "I'm going away. Going to-day. To-day." It was a chant of joy, and the girl winced as under a lash.

"Goin'? Where are you goin'?"

"Anywhere. I don't know. Somewhere. There are heaps of ways of making money, and all the world to do it in." He jingled some loose coin in his pockets, and laughed. "One can always knock round and find something, you know."

"Yes," said the girl simply.

She was bound neck and foot by the strait life that would bow her before her time. But she had just that curse of imagination which made her know.

"If I might have the can back——" suggested Condy.

The girl rushed into the house, her face aflame; and Condy whistled, "I'm off to the Rio Grande," taking no heed for the words.

The girl brought the washed can back, and Condy gave careless thanks.

Then he held out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said.

The girl rubbed her own coarse palm with her apron, snatched blindly in a loose, pudgy clasp, dropped the man-hand, and spoke without tone.

"Good-bye."

Condy limped down the hill, whistling, and he did not look back. If he had he would have seen the girl standing with her right hand to her face as though it ached.

ANOTHER MAN'S LIABILITIES.

“The strength of the wind is Thine, O Lord,
And we are little, and passing weak ;
And if we quail when we hear Thy word
Flung by the blast from the sky-wrung peak,
Remember, O Lord, our frailty—
We who have the lonely death to die.”

THERE were three men in the long ramp of shingle river-bed that turned sickly under the nearing night. The man with the theodolite was Cummil, Government surveyor, and the man at the end of the chain was Hales. Orde squatted by a blown cabbage-tree, fiddling with the sextant, and cursing the bitter wind that drove sharp sand against his neck and ears. He was fresh-imported from warm, sheltered office life, and sappy. Besides, his heart was not with this work, which showed hard, and unlovely, and compelling, as is all strong work in the beginning.

Cummil knew this—and more—as a man must who serves Nature until he has won understanding from her. But at this hour he was soul-tired, and the very rattle and swish of the flax about the theodolite legs fretted him. For his was the part of all men who handle the raw clay ; knead, shape,

colour, and bake it; give it for a higher service, and take up the potter's wheel again.

Last night he had sent away Macmillan—who was as perfect an assistant as a Head may expect in this imperfect world—because the Government wanted him. And last night had he received instead Charlie Orde, whom the Government would also want when Cummil's virtue had gone into him.

Orde said "Er-yers, yers," to all Cummil's swift-run technical explanation; fingered his boyish moustache, and stumbled vaguely down the track that to the one man was so terribly familiar, and to the other so hopelessly new and not-to-be-understood.

Hales, chainman, and wise in the knowledge of his fellows, watched Orde in pointed contempt, and said something when Cummil shut up his theodolite and called him across the shingle-spit. Cummil grunted assent.

"He's here for me to make another Macmillan out of him, and it's no business of yours how he's liking it, Hales. You clear for the township, now, and do a sprint back with that oatmeal you forgot last night. What? Yes, leave the chain; Mr. Orde and I will finish up."

Hales lifted his right shoulder against the wind, and slouched campward with his head low. For there was patchy, leprous quicksand round the backwaters foul with a green scum, and it was not wise to stumble on the scrubby mounds where the driftwood jabbed, polished and sharp as bayonets.

He took gear from the lee of a tent fly in the manuka at the cliff-foot, battled to top of the cutting behind, and saddled up, sweeping with a swift, keen eye-blink the wide, wild stretch far below.

There was night in the jaws of the lean gorge, and night drawing over the opposite cliffs that the distance made misty and low. For the river had ripped for itself a mile and an eighth from the tussock plain since its fierce desire had first called it to the sea. Beyond the second stream two-inch-high figures made out along a sandy spit to a muddle of broom and flax-bush that lashed the air. Hales chuckled, climbing into the leather.

"Same old graft. Same old ignerence. Same old endin'. Cummil can do anythin', but he won't make the clean pertater out o' this waster. A daisy—that's what he is. A slap-up daisy."

Cummil translated this belief into his own vivid language when Orde achieved his fifth barefaced error over the chain-handling.

"An' I don't think much of the chap who broke you in. What sort of sums did he teach you, anyhow? Bring those things along. We're goin' back to camp. What? My lad, you'd better not say that again. I have to teach fools, but I'm blest if I'm going to fag for them too."

Orde followed through the cold, fitful dusk that clattered the tall cabbage-trees, and moaned over the level waste of fading shingle and sand and water. His coat was not built for shoulder-work, and his

feet were red-hot and chafed from the rough under-going. Also, the roar of the river made him homesick for the roar of the town; and always the silent, desolate power of such places as will own no man's rule lies heavy on the heart.

In the sand-embedded manuka under the cliffs the snarl of the wind was deadened, and Cummil sat on his heels feeding a flicker of fire before two tents that were faint in the shadows. Orde loosed his left arm from a clatter of picket-pegs, and banged sextant and chain on the ground.

"What the deuce d'you call this? Why isn't dinner ready? If you expect me to cook it——"

"I'll get left," said Cummil calmly. "Exactly. I thought so myself. Hand over that frying-pan, will you?"

"Hales gone to bed?" demanded Orde, in puerile sarcasm.

"Gone to Burnie for oatmeal. And the dripping-tin. Thanks."

This was a strange, horrible life to Orde, and he was dog-tired beside. But Cummil's creed taught that a man must go till he drops, and so it was that when they had fed he bade the boy do things with a field-book and protractor, and lost patience utterly when Orde complained of sand in his eyes and an insufficiency of room in the tabulated-out settings.

"Didn't you take those off-sets yourself, you ass?"

"I decline to be called an ass," said Orde, his smooth face red,

"You haven't the option. Look here. We laid this off in triangles, and that corner block between the big streams in trapezoids. Any school-kid could plot it out from this. Well; can't you see?"

"No," snapped Orde.

Cummil settled back against a tent upright, and smoked evenly.

"You'll stick to it till you find out, then. It's no good trying to monkey with me, Orde. I won't stand that kind of thing."

Cummil had served a hard apprenticeship himself, and he knew how to make men. But "Cummil's cubs" allowed (strictly to each other) that they suffered pains in the making.

Orde smudged paper, tore it with the compass-legs, and muttered crossly to himself. Cummil worked out his own private log, and fretted over the gathering howl of the wind. Then Hales came back.

"Goin' ter blow," he said, tumbling letters and papers on Cummil's knees. "West-nor'-west it is now. Comin' out o' the Gorge straight's a die. 'Be havin' the river down in a day or two, I s'pose."

"The devil! *You* suppose! Ah, well; if it comes, it comes. We'll see to-morrow. No life in the water yet, though. Something for you, Orde."

Orde flung away brass disc and feather-head ruler, and snatched at the two lavender envelopes scrawled over in a girl's hand. He dropped flat

by the fire flare, and straightway forgot the grim open river beyond the manuka, and all its promise of days of bitter work. For the breathless, un-stopped sentences held more of "dearest" and "beloved" than had come to Cummil in all his forty years.

"Orde!"

"Um-m," grunted Orde, flicking over a page.

"Come here." To do Cummil justice, he did not often use this tone.

Orde looked up, startled. Then he jammed the flimsy sheets into his pocket, arose from the crushed flax, and came round the fire circle. In the small ridge-pole tent on the heel of the cutting Hales was obviously going to bed. But Cummil's face as he sat on his camp-stool took all Orde's attention and kept it.

"This is a note from Salmon & Graves, Auckland. Do you know anything about them?"

A muscle in Orde's throat twitched, and his voice had a dry gasp in it.

"Er—yers; I think so. Money-lenders, aren't they?"

"You should know. Look at this."

Cummil's eyes sharpened to needle-points as the boy took the blue paper and read it unmoving. It explained politely that in consequence of the overdue interest on Cummil's bill drawn in favour of Orde six months back, Messrs. Salmon & Graves would feel deep gratitude to Cummil if he could see his way to make immediate settlement of the same. It gave what were

probably perfectly correct figures, and seemed to suggest that the bill totalled a round two hundred. Orde handed it back languidly.

"Somebody been making a bit free with our names, I take it. 'Looks awkward for you, Cummil. Those chaps are regular sharks."

Cummil's pulses were singing in his ears. He stood up, gripping the note.

"Have you the infernal cheek to tell me that you don't know anything of it?"

"Have you the infernal cheek to imagine that I do?" retorted Orde. He was tailor-made and delicate-handed, even at close of such days as this had been. Cummil's tweed clothes were baggy and faded, and his shoulders stooped. Hales watched the two from his tent and murmured—

"I-talian greyhound an' Skye. But the Skye'll hev t'other worried d'reckly."

"That's no answer. Do you?"

"No."

"On your honour?"

Orde's lips were unsteady. He bit them and denied afresh.

"I believe you're telling lies, you know. But it'll be easy enough to settle it. I'll wire Salmon & Graves to-morrow."

"Cummil! Don't—for Heaven's sake. Wait till I get back. There's—there's a chap awfully like me in Auckland, and if it was he worked this thing, I—I might have some trouble to clear myself from here."

"I fancy you'll have some trouble in doing that

anyway. And you won't bunk first. I'll see to that."

"If you wait till the Melbourne Cup's run I'll pay you to keep my name out of this. I've got a whole book on Tattersal's——"

"If you say another word, by the Lord Harry I'll knock your head off! How dare——"

Orde pulled the crumpled letters from his pocket, and his voice had a new ring in it.

"These are from my wife. Now perhaps you'll understand why I ask this."

Cummil subsided on a candle-box. He did not disbelieve, for an honest man can always recognise the truth, though he may fail to detect lies.

"Your wife! How old are you?"

"I shall be twenty very shortly," said Orde, with dignity. "But that's not your business. We have not told anyone of our marriage. I tell you so that you'll see you can't be brute enough to push this publicly."

"Can't I? I don't fancy it'd make any difference to me if you had ten wives."

Orde was white-lipped, and the breath came noisily from his narrow chest.

"I did put your name to that bill. It was easy enough. You're well known up there, and you write such a vile, unformed hand. It costs so much money to keep two. I never thought it would make such a difference. And she's not very strong. They promised not to push till November, curse them."

"I'll wire them to-morrow," said Cummil

distinctly; "and if you can't pay up, you'll go to quod if I have any say in it. What the deuce d'you suppose I care about your private affairs, you young cheat?"

"If you had any sense of chivalry you'd think of what might happen to her if you lock me up," cried the boy desperately.

"If every man with a wife could burk his deservings there wouldn't be a bachelor in the country," said Cummil. "No; you'll pay for this—on the nail—my ingenuous youth, and you'll go and sleep in the instrument tent to-night, for I'm dashed if I'll have you in with me."

The instrument tent was some five hundred yards down the river. Macmillan had often slept there in the hot weather.

Orde turned, his head well up, his long fingers holding his letters tight.

"I prefer to sleep in the other tent," he said grandly, and crashed into the dark scrub.

Hales pulled the blankets over his head as Cummil raked out the fire ashes and dropped his own door fly behind him. "—An' I thought Lane was a hard man! My crikey, I wouldn't like Cummil's knife inter me! It'll be a feling's cell fer Orde right 'nuff—'nless he comes back an' murders Cummil in his bed."

Sleep took him with the shivers of expectation running still down his spine; and in the next tent Cummil snored heavily, while the wind from the ranges was loosed on the night.

To the blackness and the shrieking of the last

and lowest hell Cummil awoke with a jump. He jerked open the tent fly, and the sound that called him sobbed on, low and undeadened by the bursting yell of the mad wind. Cummil knew it for the crisp, sucking crawl of water over dry sand.

He dived through the scrub where the flax ripped to shreds and the manuka bent and cried. He came out, and the wind laid him flat with his head in a puddle where had been no puddles before. The live air sang with the whirl of sand, and out in the wide, noisy dark waves slapped and washed, loud and more •loud. Cummil crawled forward three paces; blind, deaf, his heart behind his teeth. He pitched shoulder-first into a hollow where he had gathered fire-sticks at midday, and water bubbled under his neck to his ear.

Hales woke when the crash of branches stove in his tent, and he fell over Cummil outside. Cummil was unseen, but his voice stung with the force of it.

“Lug all you can up the cutting—this instant. The black tin box first. I’m going after Orde.”

Barefoot, he doubled down the shingle with the wind. Three hundred yards, three-fifty, and the half-waking pools that Orde had walked were a river that washed to Cummil’s knees even as he turned and fled from it.

From the tent he snatched boots and bridle, went up the cutting snake-wise and gasping, with the wind blowing through his pyjamas, and plucking his fingers loose on the broom-roots. In

the muddle of gorse atop he overran the old hack, forced it under bit and rein, and cast command at the clatter of tin that meant Hales carrying weight.

"Dump those things in the gorse, and get me a lantern. Dick 'll chuck himself over if I take him down there in the dark."

It was surely a thousand years before Hales swung up a light that flashed over flattened tussock and cabbage-tree, and struck one long finger down to the gleam of water below. Cummil bore forward to the white face and staring eyes.

"Lower that light." His voice cracked on Hales' ear. "Let me see the foothold—what? Devil take you! what's wrong?"

"They can do anythin'," shouted Hales, bewildered. "Blest ef there ain't water up ter here a'ready."

Cummil trod on his heels.

"Give me a leg up; I'm stiff—and the lantern. Get back, Hales, before you're swept out. I'm going for Orde. He's cut off. Hales, if we don't show up, take word to the township at day-break."

Hales climbed to the gorse and crouched there, shuddering. For the splash and the passing light were earnest of a man gone to help another man meet death.

"They'll go out ter sea tergether, an' I'll hev ter make test'mony. Jes' because he's not likin' ter lose the oof wi'out a whack for't. Mean beggar. But this 'll wipe it out clean's a plate."

In the clearing the waves took Cummil's loose boots. On the shingle beyond Dick was swimming. All the world was a mad, crashing fury, and Cummil went half mad with it. Young blood will play with eternity for pure devilment; the blood of an older man runs slower, and more chill. But the uplifting sweep of the loosed nor'-wester made Cummil drunk with the glory of one who rides on the night where the goblins of the rath are shouting.

Dick swam with long, powerful strokes. The lantern light picked up the white speck of Orde's tent to leftward. Cummil made it by daring and craft. Then he grabbed at the boy huddled on the wasting shingle, and Orde twisted on one knee, striking upward at the chin.

"You put me here to drown. Oh, you brute! But you'll stay and drown too. By Heaven, you will!"

"Don't be a fool." Cummil explained in six words. He backed to the water, and Orde cried out and shivered.

"I can't. Oh, I can't! *You* wouldn't risk it. Let me ride, then, and I'll try."

Cummil dropped off.

"Get up," he said, and his tone would have stung another man. "Leave Dick's head alone. I'll guide him. And if you play the goat we're done."

The current set from the spit. Cummil said "Thank God," and fought landward with it. He knew every reach as he knew his own heart, and

swam with firm hand on the rein. In the fourth minute Orde spoke, and his words whistled under the roar.

"A tree—coming down—oh, good Lord! it'll catch us. Oh, my——" He beat Cummil off, wrenched the reins right and left, and Dick went down headlong as the torn tree rode above them, broad-armed as a forest.

Roots pressed Cummil down smothering to the boulders of the bottom, where he came cheek to cheek with Death, and was afraid. Death rose with him to surface again, and it was Orde with a white face that showed on the flood like spume. Cummil clutched at the body, swung it over the tree-trunk, and floated beside, his arm crooked in the branches. This was mechanical. Understanding came back, and he said, "Gad, it's cold!" Then he laughed. "Snow-water, of course, and I'll have cramp in two acts. 'Must get on that trunk——"

Weak moonshine dripped through the cloud-wrack. Cummil straddled the tree, and swamped it. He cast loose, and Orde's face gleamed again where the branches lifted and cradled it.

Cummil's breath came sharp through his teeth.

"There's room for one only," he cried; and the wind chuckled in the wet leaves round his head.

Across the full sweep of the river deep called deep with gathering triumph, and the tree shivered, driving faster before the snarl of the low-flying scud.

"Perhaps he's dead," muttered Cummil, and slid his hand under the soaked pyjama coat to the breast.

The heart-beats were strong and slow. Cummil sickened, and the devil tempted him. This is no man's business but Cummil's. In the end he writhed his numb hands in the branches, and looked at Orde with new eyes. For hereafter Orde had claim on him in that Cummil had given him life.

The night widened and whitened. Flashes of skeleton driftwood struck up from the higher islands, and harsher than the yell of any wind lifted the scream of the gulls above their drowned nests. The black-headed waves rode by in thunder to wreck the bridge of a hundred piles, and the glisten of shingle laughed with white teeth here and there through the empty waste.

Something soft brushed against Cummil's shoulder, and made port in the reach of branches. It was a dead sheep, sodden and swollen. Cummil closed his eyes from it, and thought of Orde. The boy was light-built and under-developed. He had done already more evil than good. The tree with its wake of a coal-hulk must ground in some one twisting channel, and the chase Hales should lead from the township would nose Orde out of the branches whilst Cummil went out to sea and the gulls. His body was deadening by inches, but his brain was terribly clear.

"I've chosen already," he said. "I can't pull him off. My God, if I only could!"

In his boyhood Orde took the burden that Cummil had passed uncaring. The mystery that makes a man answer for the life of a woman had touched him, and the still face, unfretted by the rip of the wind, spoke louder to Cummil than Orde's lips could do.

"He robbed me," said Cummil voicelessly; "and he's robbing me again. If we do make land I'll take payment—for all. A man must shoulder his own liabilities. How dare he bring a woman into it, and let her suffer—young brute! Oh, God ha' mercy! It's cold! It's cold!"

His hands had stiffened where they hooked in the roots. His head dropped on them sideways, and the unleashed joy of the waked river-bed dulled and passed on his ears.

A half-mile the tree drifted, then baulked at a gorse-spit, and drove inshore on a backwash. Flax-tangle and kowhai snatched at it and held; and it rocked in the yellow swelled flood till the dawn.

Orde roused when the sun beat hot through a hot-breathing wind. He drew up his knees stiffly, and clung to the kowhai, moving his eyes slowly. For the bite of Dick's shoe on his temple was making him deadly sick. Overhead the steep cliff raked like the stern of a liner. The rest of the world was unbound and savage; a spumy ocean made hazy with blowing sand.

Orde crawled up the trunk for the space of six heart-beats; stopped, giddy with pain, and

saw Cummil. The nape of Cummil's neck was bare to the sun, and his face was down on the leaves. Orde knelt, and broke the twigs away from the rigid fingers.

It was perhaps four hours later that Cummil felt the hands that shook him, and heard Orde's voice.

"They're coming," it said. "They're coming with ropes, Cummil; they're coming to save us."

Cummil sat up.

"I died last night," he said slowly.

Orde's bloodshot eyes narrowed, and his breath came brokenly.

"You did—very near. If I hadn't yanked you out there 'd have been no one to claim that two hundred, Cummil."

Cummil stared; and the little figures dropping down the straight scrubby cliff fifty yards off lost interest.

Then he bowed his head on his knees, and rocked in helpless laughter.

"And my life's worth more to me than that, isn't it? Orde, oh, Orde, I'm very grateful. Aren't you?"

"I have nothing to be grateful for," said Orde, "—as yet."

"No, of course not," answered Cummil, and laughed again so that Hales, presently receiving his master in the bight of a slung rope, comprehended that he was "clean dotty."

For Cummil, grabbing his shoulder, and stumbling on the tussock, said—

“When you die for a man, he becomes your property, Hales, whether he knows it or not, and you’ve got to look after the boundaries. But don’t you ever do it, d’you hear? It’s likely to prove expensive. Where’s the brandy?”

SUCH A GIRLIE.

CLINT washed three flannel shirts, and a pair of moleskins, and a sock without a toe. He hung them on the fuchsia tree beyond the creek, and went to his Sunday dinner perspiring with pride. For Cortiss had washed but a tie and a drill shirt stolen from Sheehan; and Muggins, who had ridden fifteen miles the night before to see his best girl at Topeke, had done no Sunday work at all. This was the bush camp whence Lane drew his stakes, and bridge-planking, and other rough timber, and Muggins had gone buoyant from hot hours of labour, with blistered hands and a cunningly oiled fringe.

Clint, his hands yet undried, fell over him at the wharè door, and expressed artless surprise.

"Thought yer 'd never be back till bedtime," he said. "What's hit yer, Muggins?"

Cortiss looked up from the table where he fed himself with alternate knife and fork.

"Give you the go, 'as she?" he asked delicately. "Got some chap better—which she could heasy 'nuff? Pheelan, is it? Hi laid two to one on 'im."

Muggins had not the reserve and dignity which

is born of a chivalrous heart. He made things clear in a language that delighted his hearers immensely, and flung through the room wild-eyed and incoherent, and looking for trouble.

"Which on yer knew Pheelan was sweet on 'er an' niver tole me?" he demanded, following Cortiss round the table. "Which on yer was skunk ernuff?"

"Not me," said Cortiss, with all modesty. "Clint it was. Hand when Hi said as Pheelan 'd a had more sense, 'e said as 'e'd a contrack in 'is heye an' couldn't see 'er. So that was 'ow we unnerstood."

"Ne'er mind, old chap," said Clint, in haste to soothe. "Pheelan's got two teams an' a green shade ter his eye an' peacockses. And if she's lookin' fur style yer well shut on her. She ain't much class, anyways."

Then it was that Muggins called Cortiss by special names, and threw at Clint the good half of a sea-pie. Clint returned two plates and the teapot, and nearly killed Walt; and Walt, having sympathy and some understanding for Muggins, forced peace at the knuckle-point, and later gave censure where it was due.

This was after the climb through knee-deep fern that never knew the sun, and the upward swing by rata and supple-jack vines to a headland of open bush that gave them command of a half-world's view. Here Clint and Cortiss lay spread on the hot long grass and smoked luxuriously. But Walt cut his twist in fierce jerks, and frowned across the

broad gully-top where the far bush was made smudgy and faint by the smoke from a distant burning.

A sparrow-hawk floated slowly down the gully breast, and Cortiss took elaborate aim with an inch-long stick.

"A clean height 'undred," he murmured; "hand 'e drops as fur agin. Hi cud do it with Tony's new shooter."

"Yer done 'nuff shootin' t'-day," said Walt curtly. "What persessed yer t' git on Muggins' neck that way—'n Clint too? Low-down, 'twas."

Clint removed startled eyes from the range heading off the low hills to westward; but Cortiss was quicker of tongue.

"Muggins is good sport when 'e's got 'is shirt out. Crikey, 'e did make me larf! 'Hi love 'er,' sez 'e, with 'is big mouth flappin'. 'Hi'll kill Pheelan,' sez 'e. Puh! Silly orfins, the lot on 'em."

Walt sucked his half-bitten mouthpiece, reflecting. Then—

"A dog means er lot t' a chap," he said. "'N a hoss means er lot. 'N a mate means more'n both. But there's times when a chap wants a girl—what'll mean more'n all—'n he'd go ter blazes willin', t' git her. 'N maybe he'll go t' blazes ef he don't git her."

"Yes; that's right," said Clint, in slow conviction. "But Muggins won't. He'll go ter the weddin' lookin' fur another gel. That's what Muggins is."

Cortiss grunted agreement with his head on

crushed sharp-scented manuka, and the sleepy heat of the sun soaking into him.

"Sunday, an' birds singin' miles away down, an' clouds driftin' white hon blue, hand hair winier 'n we gits in hold London streets," he murmured. "We don't want no truck with gals."

But Walt, gazing with half-shut eyes into the warm, beautiful heart of the gully where a tui dropped golden ripples of song, was growling the burden of something taught him by Franklin—

"Jean, Jean, ma bonnie, bonnie Jean,
Come tae ma airms aince again——"

At the sixteenth repeat Clint sat up.

"Who is she, Walt?"

"Niver tolt yer 'twas anyb'dy," said Walt imperturbably; but his forehead was hot under the slouch hat.

"Yer wasn't singin' fur any gel as happened along, was yer? Coooin' over it like that, too! Walt, ye're a bally sneak that yer never tolt me."

Cortiss rolled nearer.

"Spit it hout," he said amiably. "Hi won't chiack you, hold feller."

"Thanky." Walt's drawl was fine irony. "Much obleeged. There ain't nuthin' t' tell. 'Was on'y thinkin' a chap ain't gen'ly much pleased when 'nother chap cuts him out wi' a woman."

"That what happened ter you?" breathed Clint, in half awe.

"No; 't's what happened ter th' other chap. It mixed me too—but I think that's all yer need know."

He turned on his back, pulling his hat over his face; but the others shook him in pained disgust, Clint saying—

“Why did yer never tell us afore? Where does she hang out?”

He knew of his own belief that a mate stands first to a man's heart. But this was his mate saying things that were the beginning of evil, and they hurt.

“She don't live at Topeke,” said Walt, shrugging them off; “'n she ain't one o' Muggins' flash sort what bunts a chap over the head 'n chiacks him everlastin'. No. 'Twas when the Athol stud was sold, 'n I went up f'r the buyin', Lane havin' typhoid.”

“North Island,” said Clint, with a groan. “A year ago. Walt, yer are a smeller, straight wire.”

“'Tain't wuth talkin' o'. But I used that throw I was showin' yer last ev'nin', Cortiss, 'n he was a big lump of a man——”

“Ye're cunnin',” said Clint, in a voice of vitriol; “but yer 'll hev ter tell it all now. Well?”

“Well, I put in a night 'r two 't her place goin' up, hevin' knowed her mother 'fore she married. There's jest her 'n her mother, 'n it's a lonely life f'r a girl. 'N fr'm th' fust I seed 't was Darlint f'r me, 'r no girl else. Yer don't know the Taranaki coast, you two. 'Tain't like th' rest o' the world much, any more 'n she's like th' rest o' women. 'Ain't had a show ter be, 'n that's what makes her so—so all round diff'rent, the girlie.”

Walt wrenched at the tussock grass with strong hands until it came up in spurts of brown earth.

"Jest sandhills, 'n flax-swamps, 'n a little house fur, fur away fr'm anythin' else, wi' willers roun' it over a stream. That's all the world my Darlint knows. 'N I've knocked 'bout much 's most, but she's a look t' the clear eyes o' her as I ain't ever knowed. 'Reckon girls has t' be wise nat'ral—don't hev th' chanst ter learn like a feller has."

"There's severial gals could do with bein' wiser," said Cortiss drily.

"That's so. 'N there's wiseness a girl c'n't learn t' herself. I reckoned 'twas me ter teach Darlint. Well, I put in four nights on th' way back; th' ferry bein' swep' down in a river-flood, 'n me hevin' them three Athol steers wi' me. On the second evenin' th' chap turned up, like he'd bin there afore. But it happ'ned I knowed his record, 'n I knowed he'd not come agin 'f I'd got two hands t' chuck him out wi'." Walt drew up his knees and sat hunched, smoking fiercely. "A rotten bad lot he was, 'n makin' up t' the widdy no end."

"Hand you waded in, an' leathered 'im straight orf the knocker," said Cortiss, with relish.

"That ain't custom'ry 'fore ladies," explained Walt. "'N I reckoned I cud do't neater 'n that, too. So I tucks up my sleeves 'n goes in 'n cuts him out hands down. 'My spec'min,' thinks I, 'I'll make her give yer th' mitten;' 'n I done it. A silly bleatin' sheep 's ever I seed, she was, wi' th' voice o' a rip-saw. But we was chirpin' roun' her, 'n watchin' each other close, my man 'n me. My land, 'twas sport! Every time he kicked I'd th' bleeders inter him quick 's a turnin' steer. Yer

c'n do a lot o' pretty back talk when yer knows a man's life. Gittin' a bit above myself I was too, thinkin' 'f I cud come over a widdy that way, 'twould be easy 'nuff wi' Darlint."

"Hand what was Darlint thinkin'?" demanded Cortiss.

"She weren't there. Too shy, she was. 'N little 'n light 'n wild's a bush-robin, wi' big grave eyes, 'n a singin' voice. I'd no chanst t' git near her yet—but the mother, she weren't no trouble."

"Ye're clever," said Clint admiringly.

Walt laughed.

"Ay, clever. I was clever. I knowed it when th' chap had gone off sulkin', 'n she stud up on th' verandah wi' her hands out, 'n 'Walt,' she says, 'Walt'—jest like that—'yer ain't fergot th' old days, Walt,' says she."

"Oh, pore beggar," murmured Cortiss, in reminiscent understanding.

"There weren't no old days; I'll take my dick on that. But I stud wet 's a dipped ship, wi' she huggin' my hand 'n talkin' 't the pace o' a boltin' hoss. 'N then she said 'Walt'—soft like that—'he's wantin' Darlint,' she says, 'n what sh'll I do wi' him? I'd like yer advice, Walt dear,' she says."

Cortiss rolled in the grass, and beat himself, and sobbed with helpless laughter. But Clint's pipe dropped from his opening mouth.

"Yer—yer 'd made a mistook, then," he said; and Cortiss yelled afresh.

Walt slid his fingers through a little heap of moa-stones white in the bracken. Two hundred

years past they had left the bird's gizzard, but he scattered them unheeding on the hillside.

"Ay," he said slowly, "a mistook. 'N it turned me weak t' the pit o' my stomach. F'r I'd landed in a cleft stick 'n no error. 'Does she love him?' says I, hot 'n cold 'n pullin' my hands away. 'I d' know,' says she. 'Send him packin',' I says; 'n she says she daren't. 'I'll show yer in th' morn'n,' I says, 'n turned out on the hills ter think a bit, 'n ter thank the Lord 't I'd baulked 't the last fence she rode me at, anyways. 'Twas she was the clever one."

Fell a silence while a weka moved noiseless through the under-scrub in desire for the bright tag on Clint's bootlace. Far across the open distance the mock-a-mocks were calling carelessly, and lower down the headland a buck-rabbit lay out of his burrow to the sun. The warm earth was utterly peaceful and slumberous, but Walt's nervous, lean face was working. Cortiss glanced at him and looked away, whistling softly.

"Sech a girlie, she is. I've seed her scootin' over rise, 'n rise, wi' her hair flyin' 'n her foot firm on th' sandy goin'. 'N I've seed her bringin' in the cows on th' old station hack what she cud run rings roun' on'y.f'r the glory o' ridin'. 'N wadin' knee-deep in the flax-swamps arter koradis 'r withes f'r her eel-baskets—'r singin' on th' lonesome hills free 's a bird." He sat upright, his chest labouring and his words coming in gusts.

"'F yer want t' wake all th' devil in yer, Clint, run loose on them sandhills 'n sandhills givin' on

a brutal lonely coast wi' th' sea moanin'; 'n go t' 'em 'long a track deep 's a man's hip what th' Maoris made when their fightin'-parties come raidin' out o' th' north. 'N go on a still night wi' th' great stars blazin', 'n jest one weak light in the old pa 'crost the lake ter mind yer o' the Maori blood spilt all over them hills. 'N white man's blood, too. Ah! by th' Lord, I cud a spilt a white man's blood that night."

"What times fur livin' in," chanted Cortiss. "Crikey, what times! 'Long comes our redcoats hoff the sea, an' gay has a neap tide full of porpoises. Hand singin' fur hall the world to hear. *Hand* findin' a hold Maori wi' a meat-axe an' some notion of usin' it be'ind hevery flax-bush! Hey! They'd be 'avin' lively hold mixes-up. 'Wish Hi'd bin there."

"Yer Darlint 'd not be hevin' no truck wi' t'other chap an' you by, Walt." This was Clint the faithful, and Walt laughed without mirth, flinging a stone at the weka as it dug its beak into the little man's ankle. Clint dived for it, and it fled, squawking; and Walt said—

"Them ranges over t' west o' th' Law is rough 'nuff, God knows—'n ugly, 'n scored by th' weather. 'N th' hills up north is smooth 'n round 'n little, wi' tussock runnin' over 'em, 'n soft pools o' sand in th' hollers. A big differ—'n it's all th' differ 'tween Darlint 'n me. How 'd I know what best t' do f'r her? I smoked on it all night, 'n in th' mornin' I didn't know. But I shuk off th' widdy somehow—'n a silly ship she is—'n tuk th'

paddock at th' double where I seed Darlint go wi' her eel-baskets. 'N I looked down the steep crick-bank what was shady wi' willers. She was there, 'n he with her. I went giddy f'r a minit, 'n if I'd had my hands t' him then I'd a killed him. She sech a girlie, 'n innercent, 'n he—I knowed what he was after."

"You'd be nasty to meet be'ind a bay'nit," said Cortiss reflectively, his mind still running on battle. "Take that look out of your heyes, man, an' pitch us the balance of it."

"All 't onst it come t' me that 'twas ter be jest man t' man, 'n I felt happy agin. F'r I know'd where I was standin' then. 'Come out o' that, Jack Leanear,' says I, callin' him by th' name 't had bin his 'fore he went inter quad f'r suthin' I ain't goin' ter c'rupt yer youth by tellin', Cortiss, my son. 'Come up ter me; I'm wantin' yer,' I says. He changed colour 't hearin' his name, but he was everythin' but a funk. He comed—on th' jump. P'r'aps I looked like fetchin' him. Darlint dropped her basket 'n put her eyes on me—clear eyes wi' th' brown o' the deep water. I met 'em straight, 'n caught her hand t' bring her up th' bank. 'I'm goin' t' send him away f'r allers, Darlint,' I says, quick 'n low. 'N it hurt like sin waitin' f'r her answer. 'I know,' she says, 'n went wi' no lookin' back. 'N, my land, I cud a woodened out a reg'mint wi' a putty-knife jest then. Tell yer, I did a wriggle out 'r my coat 'n weskit, 'n got my belt tuk up. 'Sorry t' int'rup' yer little amoosemints,' I says. 'But I mean t' see

this run through 'n take home th' brush. So ef 't's all the same t' you we'll git down t' it,' I says."

"An' yer never tolt me all this afore," lamented Clint. "Oh, Walt, Walt, why wasn't I there ter holt the sponge?"

"We weren't carin' f'r sponges, though we tuk 't in roun's, scientific 'n pleasant. I don't reckon we was lovin' each other much, 'n it began t' show pretty quick. Well, I mixed it wi' him, 'n it was a fair ding-dong. Yer see, he was a bit narked 't me interferin', 'n I was singin' all over f'r fight. But he was all o' heavy 'nuff f'r me."

"Did yer best him?" cried Clint.

Cortiss made answer.

"Did 'e? Hi should smile! Look at 'im, the hold sinner! Hand Lane thinks you a bloomin' Sunday-school gov'ness! Walt, Hi'm ashamed on you. You ain't more 'n a medium-weight, too."

"I'd a knocked him out that day 'f I'd bin a feather-weight. It was makin' me a bit sick t' think what might a happened ef th' ferry 'd not broke. He'd bin inside the ropes, that chap, 'n his hittin' was clean, ev'ry time. I jest slogged. But I got home most occasions. There was no foothold, th' grass bein' most brutal slip'ry. Well, there wasn't no reporters neither, so ne'er mind. We was down offen 'nuff, 'n up agin jes' 's offen, 'n we was both gettin' ugly. He'd painted his knuckles off o' me all right, but his cheek was laid back to th' pint o' the jaw like th' flap o' a envellup. I weren't no match f'r him in anythin' but wind. He was all tallow, 'n I ain't built that

way. So I got him worried. 'T last, when he come up half cryin' fr'm a straight one jes' 'bove th' belt, I was ready, 'n tuk him wi' that heel throw. 'Twas a fair knock-out. Come here, Cortiss, 'n I'll show yer th' way of 't."

"Take it heasy, then." Cortiss rendered himself unwillingly. "Please to remember as Hi ain't after your Darlint."

Clint lay on the grass with his world reeling under him. To settle a difference with the closed fist is natural and understandable. But that the matter should bring this light to a man's eyes and this break to his voice meant something added. Walt's lips had rolled back from his chipped and tobacco-blackened teeth, his words came quick and rough, his body was charged with a savage electric power that Clint would never know. It was quite simply the force of that sense of chivalry which each man interprets according to his breed and training. But Clint would not know that either.

Cortiss did, though he shivered elaborately under Walt's hands.

"T'other pore beggar hout of 'orspittle yet?" he demanded. "What did you do to 'im, Jeffries?"

"Jes' this," said Walt, and turned the little man over with a swift toe to heel, and a fling of his right leg across the other's shin.

Cortiss gathered himself up, saying soberly—

"'Ow much o' 'is neck did you break?"

"Not 's much as I'd a liked. I tuk him t' his

home, 'n roped in a doctor t' sew up his cheek; 'n that doctor was jes' th' chap I was lookin' f'r, so I laid out th' whole thing t' him. 'A mos' disgraceful 'n lawless affair,' he says; 'n I wish I'd bin behint the fence. Yer 've hall-marked him inter his six fut o' earth,' he says, 'n I reckon I got some influ'nce in this township what'll make him want t' be a bit scarce d'reckly,' he says. 'We got 'nuff native-raised rotters here wi'out any o' his persuasion,' he says. That doc. had sense, so I comed away knowin' as things 'd be all s'rene. What d'yer say t' goin' down? It's hot 's a pipe-dottle out here?"

"An' you've told hus the hidetical least 'arf," cried Cortiss. "'Ow did it pan hout with the widder hand your Darlint?"

"Yer ride t' yer own beat," Walt dropped him neatly over into the branches, "'n then p'r'aps yer'll git home 'fore dark."

But as Cortiss slid with wrathful crashes downward, Clint jumped under the grip on his shoulder.

"Yer know me better 'n any man does. Clint, d'yer think I'd hev a show? I don't know nuthin' but lives o' men, 'n she—I'm too clumsy f'r her——"

"The widdy——?" began Clint, startled.

"Widdy be blowed! I'd yank Darlint out fr'm under her nose—'f she'd come."

"Why in all things didn't yer ask her to come when yer was there?"

"How cud I? Sech a girlie! She don't unnerstan'

what there is t' life yet. Jes' as wild 'n free 's a bird, 'n a man's too clumsy f'r her. But she'll be wantin' more 'n the hills 'n the wind c'n give her, 'n I reckon t' be goin' up t' see 'f she'll take it fr'm me."

"Goin'—away?" Clint's dull, pallid face waked under the blow.

"Goin'. Ay, goin'. Away fr'm Mindoorie, 'n up t' Darlint. Told Lane when I was down yest'd'y. I c'n't rest no longer."

"S'pose she won't hev yer?"

Walt lowered his feet over the gully-edge.

"I won't s'pose that till I see her wife o' someb'dy else. 'N ef ever she's that I'll break f'r 'Stralia 'r somewheres. Never Mindoorie agin. I've thought o' her here too much f'r that."

Clint followed slowly from the rampant blue day full of heat and wide breezes to the dark, majestic coolness of the bush. But his heart was heavy in him, and his feet moved with no lightness.

For the shadow of Darlint stood between him and his mate, to part their ways through all the years to come.

ON BASSETT'S CAMP.

"I'm down at the heel of my service,
And when I am laid on the shelf,
My very wust friend from beginning to end
By the blood of a mouse was myself!"

KIPLING.

"**D**EAR Lord! are all the men mad this tide?
Another fool lookin' for work. Ask him,
Pollock, can he not find enough to do keepin'
cool."

It was Bassett who spoke. He sat in his trousers and singlet, his drab head still wet from sluicing in the bucket that stood by the table.

Pollock shifted his heavy-shod feet like a tired horse.

"He is cool—cool an' sour as rotten marsh-land. Wi' the hide o' a old scrub bull, an' the nerve of a drummer. 'I'm a fust-flight axeman,' he says; 'and you tell yer boss he'd best put me on.' Them's his breathin' words, but I ain't pro-ducin' his tongue. That's c'lonial Scotch wi' a sprinklin' o' biddy-bid."

"I'm not wantin' a half-team. Tell him he can shake down an' go on in the mornin'."

"That's what you told me." A man raised on

the bunk in the corner. "That's what you told me, Bassett, and be damned to you. If he's a half-team so am I, and we'll couple, whoever he is. Show him in, you over there. And look sharp."

"No!" Bassett came to his feet in one movement, but Pollock was plunking across the clearing at the double.

"Gennleman born," he said, in amaze. "Think I don't know each tree by its creak. We'll have him on. Chances o' scraggin' a gennleman born ain't permiskus as chips. But what would he be wantin' wi' work under Bassett?"

Bassett ruled this bushman's camp for Machaffie, who ran the sawmills below Fortrose. He was quite merciless to his men, and to himself; and Machaffie's mills unloaded faithfully on the market, unbalked by all weathers that might be abroad.

"Guise," said Bassett, and walked over to the bunk. "I won't put you on. You lay more to my blame now 'n I'm keen on takin'. I won't put you on. You'd go out if you slog in this heat—out like a candle-puff, you would."

The man sighed, turning his head wearily from the bare shingle wall.

"I want to go out, and I can't. God knows, and you know, I've tried—so far as I lawfully may. If you stop me from working when I'm fool enough to want it, you'll have more to answer for yet. And more will be too much, Bassett."

Bassett's feet were bare in loose slippers. He shuffled across the earth floor, and gulped cold tea from a jug on a cupboard. Still without speaking, he dropped back on his hard chair, and waited. Gusty laughter and talk burst over the clearing where the men made in to the shanties. And the evening at the bush heart was pitiless as the past day.

"Is all hell riding the north to-night?" moaned Guise, beating the thick air where the sandflies crowded. "Where's the glory of earning your bread by your sweat, you wise man? And where's the sense of salvation or the other thing when a man's too tired to know what he wants?"

"I know what you wants. But you've played in the dust till you're blinded. Jest kip your tongue out of this, Guise."

Bassett swung in his chair as Franklin bulked up the low doorway. He read men for their powers of work firstly, and Franklin, though fleshly built, did not deceive his eye. The hands had the axeman's curve from wrist-line to fingers, and the coat-sleeves were humpy with muscle.

"He's no slousher at this," murmured Bassett. "Well, what d'you want?"

"Work," said Franklin, and lounged on the lintel.

Bassett reddened. He never forgot that he was boss of his equals.

"Cookin'?"

"Fellin'." Franklin settled his shoulders easily. "Aff an' on it is twenty year I hae been at the fellin'."

"Mostly off, o' course. What else?"

"Leave a man's private living alone," said Guise from the dusk. "You've got your own puzzle to unpick, Bassett, and that'll break all the finger-nails you can spare. You know you don't care a curse what he's done. He can swing an axe by his carriage, and that is all that's your business."

Ten days ago Franklin had ridden out from a sod wharè in the southern down-country, where Liza laughed in the doorway, with her hair blowing bright in sunshine and her baby asleep in her arms. That journey had left him with one sane intent. He must go to the bush. She would ease his trouble. For she is old as wisdom and young as faith, and eternally she has marvellous and mysterious comfort for they that love her.

"What wull ye be givin'?" Franklin spoke absently. Against such a little square window as the one at the shanty end he had seen Liza's face shadowed—too often.

Bassett's toes wriggled in his slippers. Each man has his own method of lashing his tail.

"Two, four and a half—if you're worth it."

"They're gettin' two-ten awa tae Tararua." This was Franklin's instinct speaking. Bassett swore.

"An' they're gittin' kia-kia laced over ev'ry

tree, too, ain't they? You knows that if you knows the wage, you sneakin', scrapin' Scotchie. There's no vine here but a bit o' lawyer——"

The third voice rode in on the storm.

"Take it, man. Bassett can't help himself—and he won't help another. Couple up over this. He'll give me the kick else."

"Take it or leave it," said Bassett, breathing fast. "And git."

"I'll tak' it," said Franklin slowly.

Bassett wheeled with a grunt, not knowing that Franklin would have paid for work—hard, brain-dulling work—in these days.

"Take your mate too, and go to your feed. Clear out, Guise; you've got answer this time. You'll come an' cry off in a week."

Guise was unshaven and bowed, and his step had no ring. Moreover, he swung his swag by a flax rope. But the men in the long eating shanty picked him in the quiver of an eyelid when he crossed a form between Muller and Slade, and called on the cook for meat. Franklin's worn, rough face lightened and changed. For the spell worked already. The place reeked with heat and all smells that it brings, and the faces were strange; yet the rush of talk was the same as in days unforgotten, and the clean-moving, slow strength of the men was the same. The alert, keen-eyed faces were good to the sight, and the sweat that caked on the forearm of the roadman beside him. For they shouted of life, vivid life.

Through the clatter and scraping of tinware, and

the chaff of a red-headed bullocky blared the voice of all-embracing complaint.

"Duck Walley," said the roadman to Franklin. "An' where Duck is breeds trouble, like flies on a carcass. He's givin' Muller his lip ter-night."

Franklin sucked in his breath with a whistle. Duck belonged to the days when men called him Red Franklin, and stood clear of the passion of his shut hand. His hands had strength yet; nor was the fire of his youth quite spent. He glanced over the table at Guise, holding his knife and fork daintily and taking no heed of surroundings; at Muller, shifting nervously on his form and taking a look in his eyes that meant danger this weather; at the twenty more, stoking up, unconcerned and dripping, in the gasping furnace of the long, close room. Franklin swallowed scalding tea from a pannikin that burnt his mouth. He leaned forward, his great hard hands spread on the table.

"Coom awa' oot o' that, Duck Walley. Leave the chiel alane this nicht, that is ane sent fra the Pit by tellygrum, onyways. If ye wad ficht, coom wi' me, Duck, that stretched ye that day in Hod's bar wi' all the drive lukin' on, an' Lucy laughin' in a corner."

Duck's beefy face glowed hazily through the steam of hot meats and hot breath.

"I paid yer that, an' I'm shut on yer, Franklin. 'Vast interruptin' when I'm conversin' wiv this bully boy."

He tipped the dregs of his pannikin into Muller's plate, and Muller sprang up with a curse drowned

by roaring laughter. Guise dragged him back, saying something that Franklin guessed only; and the boy obeyed, trembling, with labouring chest.

Without special care any man can know men. It needs a strong mind to recognise the woman that is in every man, and to give it its due regard. Muller's day's work had stretched on a blazing sidling where the road carried into further bush. He had stooped at the pick until his head swam and the nape of his neck ached straight down to his heels. He had crawled home by unshaded ways through the stagnant air, his nerves quivering like piano-wires; and the heavy meal in the close stench of the shanty clogged the blood in his veins until its throbbing was pain, and his eyes saw red mist. A woman or a child would have cried itself sane. The woman in Muller clutched his throat hysterically; the man part made him drunken with rage.

Duck's voice cleft the joking that followed the laugh. What he said is not for quotation. It brought Muller to his feet, motionless for one tense second. Guise watched, one elbow on the table, his eyes smiling under his hand. The boy was long, weedy, and raw like many New Zealanders before labour and age fill them out, and his big-boned face turned white through the sweat Franklin swung his leg over the form.

"Get grups on that, lad," he shouted, and his voice broke short like a snapped twig.

Muller caught a tin plate from the table, and

brought it endwise across Duck's head with a straight downward chop, exactly as the Maoris used their first axes. He put considerable strength into the blow, and Duck went down without remark. The men rose up, confused and uncertain. But in a crowd there is indubitably one who scents blood with the thirst of a dingo.

"Crack him," screamed Purvey, coming over the table among the dishes. "Tie him up. He's killed Duck—killed him dead."

Guise grabbed Purvey's leg, sending him down under the heavy, hurrying boots.

"That's the argument for you. Steady, men. The boy's mad enough as it is. He'll wooden more of you out if you scare him."

Muller heard Purvey's words, and saw the inert lump on the floor where the blood made a thick puddle. He snatched Glossop's sheath-knife from a box, slashed the hands that grasped at him, and dived through the door. The men tumbled after, swearing. They left Duck where he lay, and passed Pollock sitting on the table and nursing a badly cut wrist. Across the clearing where the red of the day still hung Muller bolted for the midmost hut. Purvey shrieked aloud.

"Oh Lord! He's after my rifle. He knows where it's kep'—an' the cartridges too."

Purvey belonged to a volunteer corp ten miles over the hills. He was a decent target shot, and had won his Lee-Enfield last year. It was the latest make, with magazine attachment, and Purvey kept it slung over his bunk.

"This is going to be funny if the gun will shoot," said Guise, his drawn face waked to interest. "Go and take it away from him, Purvey. Cool cheek of him to use your things, you know. But I hope he killed Duck."

The men charged the shanty straight from the jump. Within ten paces they broke and scattered like chaff blown among the trees. Muller had loosed on them out of the darkness. He came and sat on the door-sill, a couple of clips to his hand and the rifle laid over his knees.

"Nine more here," he said, tapping the breech, "and twenty. That's one for each, and two over for luck. I've killed; I've killed. And if I let you go, you'd tell that I killed him."

"Don't be a blasted idiot, Muller." A gang-boss came out into the pale arrows of the afterglow. "You've killed no one, but you might if you let that go off again. It 'd take more than a whole dinner service to stiffen Duck, an' then he'd not be past mendin'. Put that thing down, and we won't bring it up on you."

Muller sobbed in his throat.

"You're havin' me," he said. "I seed him dead. I'll see you dead too——" The stock leapt to his shoulder, and he fired without more explanation. The gang-boss took shelter headlong; then lay on his stomach and gasped, and felt tenderly the graze that was wet on his ear.

The men slouched into knots, and began to take the thing seriously. Such as this had not come under their jurisdiction before. Someone sneaked

away through the scrub for Bassett; someone followed Guise's lead on Purvey.

"Go ye in, me bould bhoy, an' freeze ontu your riffle. Shure, here's your fust taste ov active sarvice wid the reg'mint shtandin' tu give ye th' glory. Wade in an' abolish him, Purvey. He's your feed."

The bush breeds her workers for herself; she will have nothing to do with the rejects of other trades. And man by man, the camp was of that powerful, swaggering, light-hearted type that will fight like bulldogs, drink like dry sand, work like the demons of the pit, and play like children after school in the grave, gaunt bush wilderness that holds their lives. But the dangers that a man may grapple and hold give fair play, and there the bushman will keep up his end without fear. To the lay mind argument with Muller seemed likely to prove one-sided. Glossop said openly that he did not feel happy, "Though I'll rush him if yer 'll bunch it. But I ain't fur walkin' up ter him one be one, and lettin' him plug me ev'ry time."

"Sling a axe at 'im," suggested a roadsman. "We cud wiggle roun' in shadder o' Harrison's shanty, an' let fly. Serve 'im right if we takes 'is leg off, the brute."

"The lad's daft wi' terror an' yer talk," said Franklin, turning. "Can we show him Duck livin', tae mak' all things clear?"

Pollock and Dunn had drawn a careful compass from the eating-shanty.

"Duck ain't nice for showin'," they said. "He's breathin' like a mile of coast with the tide settin'. Whaled on his hair-partin' jest proper, he was."

Bassett crashed through the scrub with a swing and the crisp tones of the master. He looked from the men that skulked in the trees to the crouching, wild-eyed figure in the doorway, where yellow fading light shook on the dreadful face and died along the glint of the rifle-barrel. The suffocating heat blanketed the dark standing tree-tops, and a nerve-numbing tension as of some swift-coming horror drew about the clearing. Bassett loved occasion to loose his tongue. He was really no braver than his men.

"Nice plucky lot o' wrecks, you are," he said. "Twenty to one, an' you funk him. Oh, you rotters! Why didn't I bring up a girls' school instead?"

"Ut wud hev been lively—if ye'd brart us on tu. Thry ut wan tu wan, then, ye that are wuth twinty."

"Don't you give me no back-talk." Bassett stepped out with a swagger, swaying his lithe body back from the waist.

"Drop that shooter, Muller," he shouted. "Drop it, or I'll give you the sack."

The men sniggered, and Bassett's stung pride drove him forward twelve paces.

"Drop that rifle," he cried, with an oath.

Guise thrust his head over Karrigan's shoulder. There was something eager about his mouth.

"Ass," he said lightly. "He's going to be dropped himself."

The rifle spoke on the heel of the words, and Bassett pitched on his face, to lie horribly still.

"He twitched once," said Pollock, through a raffle of talk. "Like a man wi' the soul goin' out o' him, that. Now, what was we to do? Bring him out, I seepose."

They tried it. The shanties were joined, wall to wall, and Muller held the centremost door. This made rear attack hopeless, and a straight charge unpleasant. Muller rose at their rush. He screamed as a mad horse screams, pumping the trigger until the spent cases spun out sideways with an audible hiss. The range was five chain, and Muller swept it desperately to the end of his round, with the bullets snarling and smacking wickedly into the great rough tree-boles holding up the darkening sky. Then he reached for more clips.

This had exactly the effect of a double charge of shot raking a rabbit-warren. The men took cover, swearing, and purple with heat. Purvey, tripping in supple-jack tangle, rolled on yellow-pink moss where Guise stood by a rimu. Guise had been there all the time, within full bullet-range. He commanded a clear view of Muller, and of the limp heap on the trampled grass. Bassett was bareheaded, and his tow hair looked white in the twilight. Guise was calculating that one in ten of those little hopping bullets might home in that

heap. He stood with hands thrust in his pockets, and a slow straight smile on his lips.

"His fust game were lollipops to this," grunted Purvey, gathering himself up. "Re-tire in good order, you sinners; attendin' strickly to formation. He's got two clips yet—or per'aps three or four. Wastin' my ammunition, too. Sure as truth, he'll pay for't."

"He'll be payin' fur more 'n that," muttered Danny Reede; and the men growled a savage assent.

Franklin crashed through the bushes with the noise of a cow-elephant.

"We hae turned the tail aince an' aince mair," he said. "Div ye na think that is eneuch? Cauld deith or hot, it is ane when it cooms. We'll tak' it through this time for luck—me an' two ither beside."

"What—for *you*?" demanded Danny insolently. "What—for you what's bin eatin' yer porridge with a shepherd's crook while we bin holdin' up this 'ere camp an' takin' th' township to pieces an' gittin' out our thirty thousan'. I'm with you straight now, an' no heel-taps. Will we rush him? You're a good mark fer the hittin'. So'm I."

He slipped his boots, kicked them aside, and swung round. Danny was the neatest-built man on the camp, and the quickest. Guise reached out, and grabbed at his shoulder, speaking seven words in an unraised voice.

There is something in caste that must hold,

though a man drop his right to recognition. Franklin swore, and Danny refused point-blank. Then they gave to Guise's will, and vanished into the bush.

"What that chap says goes," murmured Purvey, raising on his elbows to peer after Guise walking into the clearing. "Held men in his hand once, per'aps."

"Why wasn't you out there with 'im?" asked Dunn righteously. "You as is a certified defender o' our country. I'll pay no more taxes for the upkeep o' our certified defenders 'nless they stand the washin' better 'n you, you sloppin', slinkin' rag. We'll take this out o' you when it comes settlin'-day, Purvey, an' don't you ferget it."

"I don't mind wi' t'other chaps roun'," snapped Purvey.

"Blank cartridge then," murmured Slade, and the cook giggled in a high, nervous falsetto.

The clearing was full of shadows, and the black of the doorway fifty yards off held a shadow that was only less black. Guise ran in directly, with big swinging strides and his chin up. Along the shanty faces from right and left crawled two indistinct figures, snake-wise, rapid, and silent. Muller did not see them. He was shouting at Guise in half-prayer.

"Stand away, stand away, you big fool! I don't want ter shoot you—but I ain't goin' ter be took—you're makin' me do it. All right, then; if yer will have it——" He sank on one knee,

frowning to get sights on the steadily running man.

In the bush behind a frightened boy was yelping like a chained pup, and the whole of the camp was blind-angry.

"He's runnin' clean onter Muller's pint—not even breakin'." "He'll make th' boy a murderer if he ain't one a'ready." "Sling it up. He's pluckier nor you'll ever be in twenty gen'rations." "Oh, give it a rest. Muller is gettin' rattled every minit—see to that, now."

"I'll hev ter kill yer," sobbed Muller. "It's yer own bloomin' blame——" A hand gripped either ankle, turning him on his face with a crash. Danny rose up, catching the rifle, and flinging it back on a bunk.

"An' that's done wi'," he said. "Time Muller went down to barricks an' larned shootin'."

Guise was stooping over Bassett when the men came across in the bulk, and he did not invite remark.

"Plugged in the shoulder," he said. "Fainted—funk, like as not. Cart him back to his bunk, and I'll strap him."

Before Muller, struggling and whimpering, had been bound with three belts and a rope, a thick, uncertain voice clashed into the middle shanty.

"I'm seekin' a belayin' pin for to lay out Muller. Did yer happen to have one handy? I'm goin' to tie him up squealin' to the yards an' leather the hide off of him. He clumped me on the top locker,

an' giv me a 'eadache. Did any on yer happen to see?"

"I shud smile," said Danny, shaking the sweat from his hands. "It was the interduction ter a slap-up three-act drammer, Duck, an' there was you loafin' under the table an' missin' it. A nice pretty sight you are, too, fer your gel to be seein'."

"There's nary gal here," said Duck, turning ponderously, and stretching himself. He felt at the bloody handkerchief that stiffened on his head, and sat down on a candle-box. "Tell Muller I'm lyin' inshore to blow him out o' water. Was that Muller I heard givin' lip?"

"No," said Dunn, stuffing a gag in Muller's mouth. "Go to bunk, Duck. Take him off, some of you, an' stop grinnin'. 'Tain't goin' to be too funny when all's done wi'."

"Eh, Guise," said Franklin, when the camp was half asleep, and he clambered into a topmost shanty bunk, "it is yersel' that has the sperrit. I wadna hae gang forrard that away for all ma tradeetions. Muller all but nicked ye mair times than mair."

Guise pulled off his coat wearily. His hair was wet on the forehead, and his face showed a sunken pallor where the flush of heat and excitement had gone.

"Yes," he said. "And does it do a man any good in the ending to risk what he doesn't want? Muller has cried himself sane, and Duck and Bassett will keep still tongues for a week. I get

off scot free. That is the devil's compensation. He takes what you've given your soul for, and leaves you all the rest."

And from the silent heat of the bush sounded the tired creak of a dead tree.

MOTHER MACGREGOR.

“And though I ha’ followed that other path,
Where the fruit’s blood-red to deaden the brain ;
And though I ha’ played with the devils of rath,
And dabbled my soul in the Darker Stain :
There is yet a woman to kneel and pray—
‘ Lord, have mercy on such as they ! ’ ”

SHE lived exactly opposite the boundary gate which gives from Mindoorie wharè to the Packer’s Road. The road belongs to the earliest of all things. It climbs from the township through hills and creek-bottoms and manuka-scrub away to Kea Flat and the scoria mountain heaps where musterers lose themselves in the winter snows. A very brave man can bring a two-wheel trap down the Packer’s Road in daylight; and the Mindoorie boys used it as a short cut on Saturday nights.

Officially speaking, Johnney Murphy is the only man who ever fell over into the raupo swamp at Third Corner, and lay there, peacefully drunk, till morning. But all the world knows that it was not the curate who found the others.

Through the curate that began for Harry Morel and Mother Macgregor which has not ended this side the stars. If some people are to be believed,

it will not end the other side either. Nor was Muggins altogether blameless. Mother Macgregor told him so with the edge of a shovel when he was lost in her hen-house for two succeeding nights before the Bachelor's Ball, and Muggins carried a purple ridge on his right shoulder for six weeks. But he did not get the hens. Mother Macgregor took them down to Thornton's Store on the next afternoon, and it was there that she heard what the curate said to Harry.

Harry had come in with a team for a load of fencing-wire which Thornton had forgotten to order. It was a blue-cold day, and there were three hotels in Thornton's street. Because of all these things, Harry used words to Thornton which brought the curate fluttering across the shop to interfere. The curate was very young, but that did not give him the right to reprove Harry in language which one gentleman should not use to another. And Harry sometimes forgot that he had not been a gentleman these ten years.

"There'll be a holy row in a shake," gasped Thornton, coming round the counter at the double. And then he heard Mother Macgregor's high voice hailing one or other of the loafers in the verandah.

"Thanks be," he said, dropping back to his place. "Fetch her in, Jimmey. She'll put the kibosh on the curit afore old Harry runs 'is neck inter the noose. On'y yer must look slippy."

Mother Macgregor bumped up the street on her

old spavined cart-horse, with lard-bladders over the saddle-bow and live poultry cackling on the crupper. She cast herself off at the door; flung the reins to Jimmey; marched in, and banged bladders and hens on the counter.

"Three pair chuckies, an' five pund o' laird. An' ye'll no' pit me doon one feather o' them, Sandy Thornton. I ken ye."

The something in Thornton's face made her whip round with her blue eyes like pin-pricks when the sun rises behind them. She jerked the plaid back from her weather-shrivelled old head, and understood in that instant just what was threatened by the curate's callow dignity and Harry's unsteady anger. Then the curate said something which Mother Macgregor never forgave. For no man has the right to interpret the Bible according to his own bad temper. She punted the little man deftly into the corner between biscuit-tins and a vinegar-barrel, and fenced Harry off with Lum Taylor's hay-rake.

"Leave him tae me, Harry," she cried. "Ma certie! I'll sort him. He's na a mon for a mon tae argy wi'. He's nocht but a bairn that I wud spank ower ma knee but for the fashin' o't. Ay, *you*, you little tom-tit. Much grup ye'll get o' men wi' yer mincin' ways. Ye dinna ken a mon—wull ye stan' aside, Harry? I hae bin lukin' for this since ever he pit his tongue tae ma that I wis plantin' oot ma caibbages on the Sawbath. An' me a Covenanter 'at drummed his releegion over the Border years agane an' mony! I owe ye for

that, ma ten-a-penny wi' the wrappin'-paper thrown in."

The curate was pink in spots, and damp about the bridge of his nose.

"I allow no interference in my duty, Mrs. Macgregor——"

"Ye can keep that word till I gae speerin' for't. Is't your duty tae tell men they're damned 'at hae drinkit bitter waters 'at ye hanna guessed at?—ay, that ye hanna got the soul tae guess at. Pit yer hond aff me, Harry, an' dinna int'rup' a leddy—weel, ye can sit on th' coonter gin Sandy gies ye leave, but ye're no' coomin' inside this rake. See here, ma curit-laddie. This is the kind o' mon is suitin' ye an' the likes o' ye." She swung up a lard-bladder with a quick turn of the wrist. "Gie ye a empty wimbly-wambly body wi' no backbane, an' no' the spunk tae sin, an' ye'll rin grace intae him as I rinned laird intae this, till he's all swellit oot o' shaipe, an' no' a chance o' digestin' ocht. Then, 'Ma mon,' say ye, 'ye're sauvit. Sit ye on a tap shelf, an' mix na mair wi' sinners, lest they smell that ye're a wee thing rancid.' An' the sauvit body sits oop, lukin' weel frae a distance, an' cryin', 'I am na tae be touchit,' an' waitin' tae be renderit doon intae th' kingdom o' heaven. But I'm thinkin' he wad melt mair sociable whaur the fires are better tended."

Harry laid his arm about Lum Taylor's shoulders, chuckling in his ear.

"Lord, lord," he said. "And I could only have knocked the little fool down, and got run in for it!"

"You are a—an impious woman," cried the boy, choking. "If respect for my cloth does not——"

"Respect for yer fiddlestick! I hae respect for a mon an' his soul. He wears na claith intae th' next warld; forbye, he has mair nakedness tae cover. Ay, ye had better gae. Sauve yer breith for the pu'pit. But pit this in yer feedin'-bottle first, an' sook it dry. There are ower mony preachers spend their days in lichtin' of matches because they daurna tackle a cannle. U-r-r-r! I hae got the taste o' that oot o' ma mou', onyways. Whaur did ye pit thae chuckies, Sandy?"

Harry was in the verandah when she came out. He pulled his hands from his pockets.

"Shall I put you up?" he asked; and Mother Macgregor knew that it was a tone and a form unused these many years.

"Ay," she said, with a flicker of colour in her drab cheek; and she went up from his hand lightly as a young girl.

Something impelled Harry to speak as he strapped a bag of oatmeal to the D of the saddle.

"I've kept my hands off him so far; but I forget that it's only piffle, now and then. You were just in time to-day."

"Ay, ay. The tongue isna the size o' the fist, but it's no' tae be dispisit." Then, gathering up the flax reins, she dropped a benediction. "Gude-e'en tae ye—sir."

That last word took Harry past the three hotels unhalting. Then he called himself a fool. Then he wondered if she would use it again—next time.

Next time was a round week later, when Mother Macgregor stood out on the cliff-cut road hailing all comers through the windy dusk that was black in the shadows. Harry—he was riding home from the township—pulled his hack on its haunches, and swerved across to the little hand-gate.

“I’m wantin’ a mon,” she said, peering up at him, bright-eyed.

“A—er—a proposal of marriage, I presume?” suggested Harry sweetly.

Her laugh rumbled out, deep, short.

“I wis ane fule aince, an’ that’ll dae for me, I’m thinkin’. Na. It’s juist the sheet o’ iron blawed aff ma coo-hoose, an’ I canna baith pit it oop an’ be climbin’ on the roof tae tak’ it, can I?”

Harry Morel had the way with him that could wile the heart out of all women and several men when he chose. He used it as a purely commercial asset, and it paid—well. He looked down at the old woman with the boyish smile that hard living and sin had blurred so very little. All the district knew that Mother Macgregor was rich after her kind.

“I’m glad you asked me,” he said simply; and thereafter he bolted the iron to the crazy roof, carried two buckets of milk to the dairy door, and gave her “Good-night” courteously, cap in hand.

She took his sleeve in her bony fingers, and the high, raucous voice changed and quivered.

"Wull ye no' coom ben—juist for a meenit, sir?"

Harry flushed. The tail-end of the speech gave him wholesome shame, but beside it rose the knowledge that no man had yet set foot in Mother Macgregor's house, nor had any man the spending of her money. He followed her into the two-roomed shell with the sheet-iron lean-to, glancing sharp-eyed, round the broad ruddy comfort of the living-room, where the firelight washed in red waves about his feet.

"Ye'll be gettin' yer ain meat-tea oop tae Lane's," said Mother Macgregor, sweeping up cup and plates in noiseless haste. "But ye'll be likin' buttermilk an' a taste o' ma shortbreid the noo. Ay, ay, I ken th' ways o' a laddie! Sit ye doon—theer." She paused by him with a suddenly tender touch on his shoulder. "Ma mannie, it's gude—gude tae see ye by ma fire-side. Fill it oop. Noo, ye'll juist say a few wards ower it?"

Harry stared at the stuff with an insane desire to laugh. Then he remembered, at the last possible moment, that when three hotel-keepers talk pointedly of outstanding accounts, it is not wise to run amok of Providence.

"If—if you wouldn't mind saying them——" he stammered.

Her gaunt figure went up stiff as a cleaning-rod.

"Ha' ye no' a prayer in ye, mon?" she asked

sternly; and Harry, shaken for the time, bent his head and muttered something not more profane than prayers which have been said before.

The scorch of whisky was in his breath and on his palate, but he drank half the buttermilk with great gratitude. The rest he ran into his gum-boot while Mother Macgregor rummaged in the cupboard for seedcake; and he never even said "Damn" until he stood on one foot in the dark road to empty that boot.

Then Mother Macgregor crouched over the blink of the fire, her bony chin propped in the curve of her hand.

"Ay," she said. "He's got the smirch on him plain eneuch, but there's that bonnie lilt tae his voice in talkin' an' lauchin', an'—an' I'm an auld fule. For what business is't o' mine gin a laddie prefers his hoosks wi' the swine?"

But the matter began to be more than Mother Macgregor's business before long, and Lane spoke to the township doctor.

"Harry is drunk four nights in the week," he said, "and very probably it will be five nights directly. That last trip round the islands rattled him utterly. What can I do, Parton?"

And Parton said, "You can't do anything. Neither can I. The man will be a wreck before the year's out, but if it pleases him to ruin his life at thirty we can't help. Is he drunk about his work?"

"Not exactly. He manages to scrape through somehow. But of course he can't be fit much

longer. I thought of taking out a prohibition order——”

“My dear Lane, you might have tried that two years back. As a medical man, I tell you frankly that it would kill him in a week. This is not a case of yesterday or the day before. It's the result of deliberate sapping of the moral system, and it's going to be worse than you think. Mental and physical suicide, of course; but what would you have? Natural laws of cause and effect.”

Lane turned his wiry anger on the big, well-fed man who played with the gold watch-chain across his stomach and spoke lightly of such things as these. And Parton laughed.

“Do you think he doesn't know? Certainly he knows. But the mischief is done—and anyway, he won't stand speaking to. I tried it when Hefton kicked him out last night. And then I went to Hefton. Hefton is quite right, though. He has his reputation to think of, and he's been Harry's milch cow for long enough. When are you going to clear him, Lane?”

“I can't,” said Lane heavily. “I've called myself a fool every time I've taken him back, but—but one doesn't care about chucking a fellow into the gutter if one can help it.”

“Harry's there already. And he'll stay there. What? Sponge on Mother Macgregor? Not he. She wasn't born yesterday. And I tell you this: a good woman is God's chiefest tool, even as a bad one is the devil's. Mother Mac.

is a good woman. You leave Harry Morel to her."

Mother Macgregor, being very wise, gave confidence, and asked for none. But she did not give money. Harry understood that she would not so insult a gentleman born and bred, and he spent many fruitless hours in delicately fencing with the subject. Cressett had said that "Mother Mac's pet" would be flush directly; and Muggins, in a sudden glow of hope, opined that Harry would perhaps pay back the ten pounds owed to him since the quarter before last. But Mother Macgregor was blankly stupid when Harry spoke of money.

There came a night which laid some things bare. Harry called in to help Mother Macgregor water tomatoes before he took the steep darkening track to the township. A man changes very quickly when once he lets go all things. Harry's hold on himself was loosening daily, and the lines of his face that had been so fine were blurred to an occasional animal coarseness.

But Harry had not so played with the fires of life that he should not know how to hold a woman's heart-strings, and there was just a great and tender pity in Mother Macgregor's eyes as she answered his stammering lead.

"Juist sae. Poverty has his grup on a gey lot o' us. An' for why? Dae ye no' ken? Cairry burdens like Balaam's ass, an' see an angel. Gang wi' a prood luke an' a high stammach, an' ye'll trip ower the laces tied on ye by yer

body-servant. An', tak' ma ward for't, the bump will be discomposin'." She pushed back her hair, and it stood up, silver wire, in the slant of the moonbeams. "Ay, we're all cryin' for what we hanna got. I'm thinkin' the gude Lord must be fair sick o' the lot o' us. Maircy keep's a'! What's wrang wi' ye, laddie?—ma laddie!"

It was the same wild uncertainty of limb-control that had terrified Clint a fortnight back when he and Harry were mustering on the Pillar. Harry had sworn by the gods of all nations on that day, but he kept his words behind his teeth now. For the sudden lock of Mother Macgregor's lean strong arms about him, and the quick rough tones of her voice, told that she too understood. It was all to be even as Parton had forewarned. And this was just the outer side of the ante-chamber.

When the muscles relaxed, and the sweat of his face dried in the cool breath of the night, she spoke, with her heart on her lips.

"Dae ye think I hanna kenned? Ye're breakin' yer life wi' yer ain hond, like mony an ane afore ye. An' no a ward pit oot tae sauve ye. Ay, the peety an' the shame o't a'."

And then Harry answered her in speech that he had not used to a woman before; because it was quite clear that Mother Macgregor would give him no money now, and of all those long irksome hours wasted with her not one had borne fruit—but this. He got himself home in some manner untabulated; and the next day being

the Sabbath, Muggins composed a petition to Lane on a sheet of fancy notepaper, and called upon all the boys to sign it.

It stands to Johnney Murphy's everlasting credit that he stuck the pen into the back of Muggins' hand, and flung the paper among the greasy pots soaking in the sink.

"Arrah, stan' up thin, me dacint man that wud bring opin shame on wan ov his breed! Du ye think Parton wud not du ut if there was annythin' to du? Are we bloind that we du not know betther than that oursilfs? Lane is no idjit, an' he thrusts Harry to us. Sure, thin, if I am in the same boat mesilf, what matther? I'm not threadin' Harry's thrack. Will ye luke at th' crawler that knows th' or'nary loife an' death is not fur Harry this soide hell, an' wud chuck him into the ditch tu foind ut? My sowl, Muggins, I will take that out o' ye wid the edge o' me hand——"

It was not only Johnney felt better when this was done. The thing was made clear to the boys' understandings, and they accepted it, each after his kind.

Cortiss and his faction began to take pride in Harry and his future; some of the younger men shied away from him with a peculiar sensation at the napes of their necks and under their ribs, and Sheehan laid even money with Randal of the skittle alley that there would be a funeral from Mindoorie before lambing-time.

"Johnney saw it all," he said. "Three ter go, an' two's gone. Tommy Derolles in the snow, an'

old Bennet over his hoss's head. It's Harry an' the bottle, shore 'nuff. An' the sooner the better, fur he's spongin' on us ter some tune, I kin tell yer."

It is true that Lane made this good every time, and it is true also that he anxiously did all in his power to uphold the man that was giving way so fast in Harry Morel. One day he said to Parton—

"It's not fair on the boys, and we must put a stop to it. I could stand that beggar's whine of his, for I know he must have drink. But—there is so much more than that. God help us, but it's an awful thing! Shall I—shall I take him into the house, and get a special nurse? I'd hoped that Mother Macgregor might have had some power over him; but when he's fit to crawl to the township, he goes past her gate with his ears deaf and his eyes turned away."

"I thought you were a wise man once," said Parton. "Do you think Harry would shear away from the chance flap of her gown if she hadn't some power over him? I'll ask her, Lane, and follow the tip blind. She's just a randy old Scotch body, but Harry Morel was made to be broken and patched by a woman."

And yet the law was not in Parton's hands for the ruling. The desire to sit again in a saddle took Harry that afternoon, and he came down the wharè paddock, to scare Cortiss, who was putting sheep through the road gate with five dogs and much unnecessary talk. Harry's mare flew the

six-wire with her master lying forward on the mane. She slung to the right on landing, and stopped dead at Mother Macgregor's wicket. Here Harry fell off and wriggled horribly in the dust, and Cortiss, very much afraid, shouted, until Mother Macgregor came out to take skilful charge of the thing that wriggled.

It was all of five minutes later that Cortiss said, rather faintly, "Is 'e quite dead now, d'you think?"

"Dinna ye ken a swound when ye see't, ye donnert fule? Ride ye for Parton, an' — eh? Confoond yer ship! Pit them back i' the paddick, then, an' ride for Parton like Auld Nick had his pitchfork i' the sma' o' yer back. Git awa' wi' ye, wull ye——"

"'E'll be a bit gay if 'e comes round——" demurred Cortiss; and his ear sang under the clap of Mother Macgregor's hand.

"Wull ye wait for anither o' they?" Then she stooped, and lifted the helpless bulk as a mother lifts her sick child. "Git oot o' ma rood. Na — ye're no' muckle o' a mon yersel'. I'll cairry him. Eh—h! He's nane sae heavy, the laddie!"

Cortiss spread a variegated tale through the township, and brought it back to Mindoorie, when Lane went down to the cottage straightway. Hales was there, and Parton. But even Parton did not guess at all Mother Macgregor had gone through before their coming.

"Could we have done nothing to stop it?"

asked Lane afterwards (and this was the twentieth time). "Are you quite sure that we could have done nothing, Parton?"

Parton's professional calm was grazed.

"God knows. But I don't think so. I don't think so. He knew of the mischief so long ago—and you cannot fight for a man utterly against his will."

"I heard Hales burbling to a crowd in the road about 'locomotive attacks.' What does he know?"

"Nothing. Unless Harry has told him—and that's quite likely. But it's going to mean complete paralysis very shortly, and we must get him away from here at once. I'll go and talk to that old biddy."

Mother Macgregor's hair was wild; her apron was back-to-front, and the pin at her neckband had come loose. But there was nothing brittle about her courage, and there was not a change in her grey face as the smooth voice ran on to the terminal.

". . . So it is quite possible that he will take ten years in the dying. I will arrange about his removal at once, Mrs. Macgregor——"

The change came then, with a spurt of fury that startled the big man.

"Ye'll dae naethin' o' the soort! He's gangin' nae farther than juist whaur he is the noo."

"What?"

"He's a wumman's son," she said softly, "an' he hae bin a wumman's lover. Div ye no' think

that an auld wumman wha hae lost baith micht be fain tae keep him—noo? Ye wull lat me, sir? There's no' sae mony wantin' him, maybe."

Parton's back was to Mother Macgregor, and he stared for three silent minutes at Sheehan and Lum Taylor ploughing the headland behind Mindoorie house. He spoke at last, drily.

"Put it in the plural, Mrs. Macgregor. Harry has fooled more than one woman in his day."

"That micht be. But he hae the een o' a mon wha hae lo'ed richt weel aince. An' for that he is ma chairge tae me. I wull be keepin' him—gin ye dinna think there'll be mair gude dune for him onywheers else."

"Nothing can do him any good. But this is utterly impossible. You do not realise the demoralising effect——"

"Deil tak' the mon! I'll dae what I like! Div ye think I canna mainage a laddie after twenty year wi' ma ain mon? Hech! He hae seasoned me for maist things. I cud pit the hair oop on yer heid gin I likit—weel, ye'll juist tell me what's needit——"

"Why are you doing this?" asked Parton gently.

She looked away, twirling her apron like a bashful girl.

"I'm but an auld withered stick—an' he sae yoong an' bonnie at th' foreginnin'—but thinkin' it nae shame tae be gude tae me—wi' his cap doffit in all reverence 'at I wis auld an'

a wumman—sae it is that I lo'e him. That's a' o' it, sir."

Parton shut his mouth against the desire to tell her that the man who lay in the next room had done reverence to her money alone. Something shone in her eyes which would have made the truth sacrilege. He told Lane so, and nodded.

"Yes, yes; and I'll see that she doesn't suffer pecuniarily. She is a good woman, Parton. And I hope Harry won't undeceive her. But she'll get no thanks from him. I'll stake my hat on that."

"She'd tell you that love doesn't look for payment," said Parton, with clear divination.

And yet Mother Macgregor took her payment full tale in one fiercely sweet moment of a still midnight when she stooped to straighten Harry's bed. The man flung out his arms to her in the drowsy confidence of a child. "Mother," he muttered, and slept again, with his hand to her neck.

The next day Harry was rude to Parton. He had been more than rude to Cressitt and Ronan when they came to sympathise; and Mother Macgregor was crying into the wash-tub as Parton sought her after five stormy minutes.

"For God's sake go to him," he said, and his voice shook. "This is beyond my province. Or shall I send for the curate?"

Mother Macgregor wiped the soap-suds from her hands.

"Gin that mon comes tae ma gate, I'll gie him what for. I'll no' hae his fit i' this hoose. Ye'll juist remember that, sir."

She went into the next room and shut the door. What was said thereafter is not to be repeated.

Parton climbed into the saddle and jogged homeward through the bloodshot sunset. In the marshy gully below the Packer's Road a boy was tailing some cattle for the milking. The boy had a shock head and bare feet, and one brace guarding a totally indecent lower garment. He whistled the evening hymn monotonously and incorrectly, beating time with a koradi stick against the raupo and flax leaves. Parton's memory supplied some of the words of the hymn.

"Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh;
Shadows of the evening——"

The horse slung forward under a tighter grip of the knees, and the rider said—

"A long enough night, Heaven knows. And no morning at the end of it—so far as earthly eye can see. Well, good luck to that slab-sided old angel with the flat feet. No one else has the ghost of a show with him."

Came the curate from the township in all rampant pomp and severity, to tongue-lash Harry Morel into the kingdom of heaven. Mother Macgregor held her threshold against him.

"Thank ye," she said suavely, "but we're no'

wantin' ony releegion the day. An' he's na fit for veesitors. Gude-day tae ye."

"Mrs. Macgregor," said the rabbit-faced little man; "judgment has descended upon a sinful soul, and I am come to bring the lesson home. Let me pass. Ah—will you let me pass? My good woman, you have no right——"

"Ma gude mon, I hae the richt o' better muscles than yer ain, onyways. I wull no' hae Harry Morel blaspheming his Maker as he wud dae wi' ye buzzin' ower him. Gang awa' wi' ye afore I loose guard on ma manners."

Mother Macgregor was fighting for a man's immortal soul. She knew how near were Harry's feet to the pit from whence he was digged.

"If this is in truth the mental state of one preparing for—ah—a death-in-life, it is imperative that I should see him at once." Then, with a florid touch of pulpit eloquence, he added, "When laid prone upon a bed of suffering, all creatures see heaven with a clearer eye."

"I'm jalousin' ye're weak in yer nat'ral hist'ry, yoong mon. Richt eneuch a pig disna see th' sky till he's turned on his back tae dee. But a hen hanna muckle show gin ye dinna lat her luke at it sideways; an' a mon sees it best when he's stannin' straucht on his feet, an' his heart's rinnin' high wi' luv. Gin that's a' ye ken o' soul-sickness, ma little mon, ye're better this side the door."

Then the other spoke foolishness about the

punishment of sin, and a few more things. Mother Macgregor's high cheek-bones flushed.

"Eh! Ye wud be tellin' him *that*, wi' every line o' his body cryin' oot, 'Pray for me that am helpless an' hopeless, an' sae sick o' sperrit I canna pray for masel'.' Ay, theer are mair ways intae the kingdom o' heeven than through yer ain mou'—though it's not a' o' ye wull believe't. Gang awa' hame an' pray for him gin ye wull; but come here agin wi' yer judgments an' yer bywords an' yer punishments, an', dod, but I'll chaine it a' an' smack ye, yoong mon."

The wreck on the bed by the window saw the rout. It snarled when Mother Macgregor came in and drew the blind against the sun.

"Leave that alone. For God's sake let me see out, if I can't go! Why didn't you bring that ass in? 'Think I'm afraid of his pulpit talk?'"

"Na," said Mother Macgregor, folding some towels that hung to air from the window.

"Why the deuce did you clear him, then? It'd be something to do—and I reckon I could make his hair curl if he tried to come the parson over me."

"I'm no' denyin' but that wad be a chairity. Yer draps air ready, Harry."

The face on the pillow moved restlessly. It had come to show that in it which no man cared to see. But the old grey woman bent over it with the mother-tenderness that is beyond the love and pity of man for man. She slipped her arm under the twisted neck, and raised him. Harry cursed feebly; then cried like a petted child because the

drops were nasty; then fell into shaken terror of the thing that was coming to him, and sweated and raved until exhaustion and the drug brought him peace.

Hales came down to help Mother Macgregor through the night. And when he went out at last to the grey day rousing on the hills, he gulped great mouthfuls of air, saying—

“S'welp me, Bob, but all the boys'll take their trick 'fore I goes agin!”

On his first spare day the curate went in wrath to Lane. Lane told him that Harry Morel was beyond argument and beyond repentance: “And he would not hear you, either. Parton has just been up. There is only one more step left for Harry, and he will not be on the lookout for it now.”

The curate was walking with Lane to the house. He slashed with his stick at a dock nodding in the light from the wharè door.

“I warned him most forcibly. But I did wrong in not effecting an entrance the other day, although I assure you that that old woman——”

Muggins' voice sounded from the wharè.

“Tell yer I am, then! Harry's out o' the way all right, an' she's gittin' 'customed ter seein' us about. Bet yer I'll be 'er white-'eaded boy in a week. 'Arry's 'ad his little day, an' never made much out'r'er, either.”

“Arrah! Lit up that, ye brute, befure I knock the head off ov ye! Will ye hear tu him, bhoys dear, wid his talk ov a faymale he is not fit tu luke at through a tallyscope. Listhen, now. She

is servin' a dummy ov wood, wid no brains an' no spache, an' the wants ov a little child. Bhut she'll bear ut intu paradise wid her on her ould bent back; an' the tongue ov her 'll so bamboozle Howly Pather that he'll be lettin' the tu ov thim through widout ashkin' fur tickuts. Bhut he'll take ut out on you, Muggins."

"Good enough, Johnney," cried someone.

The curate coughed.

"Pretty," he said, "but utterly without foundation."

Lane stopped at the garden gate, looking far off into the wise, calm night.

"And who gave you the right to say that?" he said.

THROUGH THE FIRE.

“ And if we never tell you of the ways that we have travelled,
If we bring you but the present, and say nothing of the rest :
Just remember—we have laboured, if we’ve loafed a time
through also ;
And perhaps we’ve earned you, dear ones, by the days we did
our best.

We are clumsy in our wooing, and our talk seems rough to
women ;
And we’re very, very stupid when we’re honestly in love ;
But we’ll go down tracks to win you that a softer man would
burk at,
And our hands can help you quicker for the want of cane and
glove.”

A Back-Country Love-Song.

“ **W**HY’S tha’ fire ? Who are you watchin’ tha’
fire ? Co’ ’way from ’t as I’m doin’.
Wha’ fire for there, anyhow ? ”

Walt sat on a hurdle with his back to the log
hut and his face to the flaming hills. A dead pipe
was clamped in his teeth, and his eyes were seared
from long gazing in the heat. He turned them
vaguely on the man who stood in the road where
the red flare washed broadly and a canopy of smoke
hit the sky above. But he did not speak.

“ Or’nary burn for clearin’—what yer watchin’
for ? Silly do that.”

"'T's my lan'," explained Walt then. "'N that's my lan' too." He jerked his thumb behind him. "'N if th' wind shakes another blink out 'r direction it'll go."

The man sniffed loudly. He was not drunk beyond the inborn craft of a bushman, and the smell of fresh-cut wood with the sap in it told him the whole thing.

"Feart o' a wet burn! Lord, it'll *be* a w-wet burn sure's g-ginger. Don't want that land for thir-thirty year, eh? Heavy timber, 'at was. 'Make a muck o' things. I'm laughin'. Hear me smile."

A puff of smoke swirled from the steady column that poured to rightward, and smote across Walt's eyes. He swung off the hurdle, dropping his pipe with a curse that was half a prayer, and looked down the road in the helpless desperation of a dog cornered and tortured. His lean, leathery face was beaded with sweat and livid in the strong light. The man steadied against the heated wires of the fence connecting the hurdle, and stared with rousing interest.

"I know," he said suddenly. "You're m-man Widow Crawshaw's goin' marry. Why she goin'—goin'—you come from south las' year. No-no home f'r her 'f fire plays up wi' that. Poo' thing! Why th' big tree won't burn wet with th' vines an'—an' all the vines? I k-know. I know ev'ything."

Walt did not hear. He knew what men said concerning Darlint's mother and himself. And he

did not care. He wrote three blotted sheets to Clint once, and this was somewhere in the middle. ". . . 'N she's bleatin' round same's ever, silly old ship. I lets her fool, 'n I stalks Darlint careful—she ain't ter be hurried, my girlie. . . . Reckon th' hill-burnin' 'll be done in th' autumn. I got ten gangs at work, 'n they're doin' fust-rate. That kahikitea 'll drive like skittles wi' a good man atop. . . . I got a log hut on the flat, 'n I'll bring Darlint to 't ter watch her house built on th' hill soon's that burn's off my chest."

Very carefully Walt had chosen the day for this burn. He climbed through raffle of timber that was burst with the parching of summer while the stars were still clear in the sky; so that the thin smoke slid to the daylight by gully and overhung scarp, and shook out its banners of flame from the derelicts missed in the drives.

Then a careless wind rose with the sunset, and ever since Walt had sat on the hurdle, gathering strength for the fight that might be.

All along the crests the fire tossed red and yellow arms into the spouting gullies where tree-ferns and nikaus crumbled beside the little springs that were boiling as they dried for ever. A hinau standing clear against the black smoke-bales moaned and shivered as the lithe red swarmed up its vines. Then it swayed and toppled with a comet-tail of flame, and the chuckling sparks died on touching Walt's cheek.

He wheeled then, leapt the hurdle, and ran up the cleared track to the hut. Something floated

past the man's elbow, and lodged in a raffle of clematis. It glowed transparently red, and the man beat it out at the first crackle of life. Then Walt thrust a dripping sack into his hand, and he drew back with an oath.

"Wha-what! I'm not goin' fight that — this thing. Too hot; too—hot for——"

"You will fight," said Walt, in a voice all Mindoorie knew well, "'r I'll run yer straight 'crost inter there."

The man flinched from the ragged spare figure in the lurid light; and two chain off the steady roar of a thousand acres under flames broke to a sharper note where the mic-a-mic snickered and crackled, spurting fire from the tip of each thorn.

"I—I won't," he whimpered. Then, with a sudden clearing of the brain, "You've got three hundred chain of frontage, and it's hotter than hell down along it. T-tell you what; I'll chance it too. 'Know all 'bout fires—got 'im!"

He brought the bag full strength on one settling spark, and Walt came out to the dust of the road, looking down the low line of green timber.

"I'll jes' see what 't's like 'long to th' end. But I reckon they ain't got a lien over more 'n half. You kip waltzin' on ter 't. Then there won't be none lef' f'r yer a'terwards, yer know."

He turned up his collar against the blistering heat, and trotted off with eyes lifting for one prick of that terrible red on the dark. The wire fence played a lightning hide-and-seek as the glare fell on it and smudged into smoke-shadow. All the

westing world was under possession of scarlet columns that spouted and tottered, and shivering lances of blue-pointed steel, and great purple caverns that flattened to common red in a breath. But Walt had eyes and soul only for his new-cut marshland, plain to the sight in the unhealthy brightness that stained the belly of the clouds.

Five times in a hundred yards he followed the drift of a blazing twig into the dark and the clean piny smell that soothed his smoke-smarted brain.

The buckle of his belt was hot where his hand fell against it, and his boots cracked and burst. From the end of the line the man who was drunk saw him turn and come back. And he laughed a childish laugh of recognition, having once seen "Faust" in a pantomime. Between the crimson devils that leapt and twisted on the hills, and the long black devil flashing in and out of focus on the roadway, there was very little difference at all. He called to one gay devil as it twirled a dervish dance down a spur to the hillfoot.

"Come over. Come while I put the set on you. When I've killed the lot I won't have any more jim-jams. He said so—ah-h!"

He floored a branch that came like a catapult, and Walt's feet sounded behind.

"'Land! Yer kipin' 't down 'f yer are inky. C'n yer manage? Guess I'll hev t' do some more runnin'."

The man raised an earnest blackened face.

"If I kill them all—every one—they'll never

come back ; if I blue twenty cheques they'll never come back ?”

Walt loosened the flannel shirt on his chest ; spat, and sluiced the sack in the creek by the hurdle.

“Never ! you put th' kibosh on 'em. They're funkin' a'ready.”

The wind puffed across the hills with the snorting smoke and the eye of an express. It sank into purest calm, so that the wrack rose straightly, and weak stars blinked on the north skyline. It rammed headlong down a gully, carrying bunches of fire, and planted them far in the green timber, where the sacks caught them and beat them to death. Walt's lips split and turned black, and the muscles of his back and arms were molten lead. He could not speak so that the man who was drunk could understand. But once when he came back to dip his sack and found the man crying in the hut, he ran him by the collar across the road, and began to throw him over among the smoking rubbish. There were no points of flame on the dark when Walt came that way again.

“He'll stick till he drops now, I reckon,” he said, and went back to find a healthy fire sitting among the kia-kia vines that ran through dead fern and climbed a standing tree. He dropped the bag, and slashed with his sheath-knife until the tree was free. He beat and trampled with swift, dogged cunning till his hands and throat blistered and the lick of the flames took half the hair from the nape of his neck. He did not know that he had cried out ; but when the crisped black began

to cool under his feet and he staggered out to the road again, he heard a voice that he traced back to himself. And the voice said stupidly, over and over—

“God—for Darlint’s sake—God——”

Slowly and uncertainly the fires lessened and drew back over the hills. It was wide dawn when the danger had passed and two men sat in the dust of the permanent way staring at each other and laughing foolishly.

“I’m going to bed,” said one then, and crawled to the hut.

Walt stood up very straight, rubbing his bleared eyes.

“I’m goin’ t’ see Darlint,” he said loudly.

But a drover found him snoring in the road at midday, and it was the full of a week before he rode over the little sandhills to the house by the willows, and Darlint.

It was Darlint’s mother who first saw him on the sandy track behind the Maori cemetery. She dropped her potato-bucket on the path, and screamed the news in through the bedroom window.

“Walt—Walt’s comin’, Darlint! D’you hear? Will there be time to heat up that there pie for dinner? How long ’ll it take him to get here? Come an’ look, then. What? *There*, stupid. Front o’ that flowerin’ cabbage-tree.”

Darlint laid both hands on the sill, and looked out from clouded brown eyes. She was straight and tall and very slim, with dark hair that grew

low on a square white forehead. But it was the grave mouth, and the soft turn of chin and throat, that made men look twice at Darlint, and then come back to look again. She caught her underlip in her teeth. Then she yawned. "P'r'aps it's Crad Porter. 'Sits his horse like a sack o' beans, anyway," she said untruthfully.

"He don't. But you ain't got the cause to rekernize him I have." The widow giggled, and fumbled with her apron. "I can see him plain 's the pump from here."

"He's plainer than that any day," remarked Darlint. "I'll go and put the pie in, mother. You get tidy, quick. Yes; you can have my new piece of pink ribbon, and the lace collar."

She shut the oven door on the pie, and poked up the fire. Then she fled, taking the forgotten dust-pan and broom in the passage with a six-foot leap; charging headlong down the flagged path, across the paddock beyond, and over the plank where the brown stream ran into shadow. Behind were the bare hills, blotched here and there with manuka. In a patch of it Darlint took cover, and lay flat, her chin in her hands, to watch Walt riding by unknowing. She saw her mother meet him on the verandah, and she hid her eyes, and said—

"I can go out an' be a servant. I won't never live with them—then. How dared he—oh! An' I thought he was a good man once."

Darlint's mother fell over the dust-pan as she bore Walt into the "best room," which Darlint

abhorred, and Walt turned restive instantly under the pelted excuses.

"No methody, she hasn't, an' no observance, too. Took you for Crad Porter what rides like a spring egg-beater. An' I will say you sit solid as a hatchin' hen, Walt. An' anyone with a grain of love—he, he, he! What am I sayin'?"

"Where is Darlint?" demanded Walt, sitting square on the horsehair chair.

The widow simpered, drooping her sandy eye-lashes. Walt was rather an observant man, and he quailed before the lace and ribbons, and the coquettish advances and retreats. He breathed hard, and stared unblinking.

"Darlint? I do' know. You're lookin' tired, Walt dear. Oh, naughty boy! See that wrinkle—and that——"

Walt fenced her off with a stern hand.

"I'm all right. Got them hills burnt 't last. Cleanest burn in Taranaki this year. Goin' t' sow it nex' week, 'n I've took a contrack along th' other frontage f'r sleepers. 'T's goin' t' pay fine."

The widow's hand fluttered on to his knee.

"An' what will you do then—dear?"

"Build a home," said Walt, his eyes shining. "I got the timber fr'm th' hills at the fellin', 'n it's ready sawn 'n dried. I was thinkin' t' build on the mic-a-mic spur—that's a dead clean burn——" He got himself to his feet, going hot and cold in throbs; for the widow's face had been very near.

"I'm g-glad you'll have a home o' your own,

Walt," her hands stole round his arm, "for you mus-mustn't come here any more."

Walt wrenched his arm free, and caught her by the shoulder.

"What in darnation are yer sayin'?" he asked hardly.

"People are talkin' so," she whimpered, more afraid of his tone than his touch, "an' Darlint——"

"Darlint—ah! Well, what o' her? Stop y' snivellin' 'n answer me. Well?"

"Walt, you never w-was so unkind before. B-bad boy-y——"

Walt, swore frankly. Then he put his hands in his pockets and took a turn through the room.

"I'd punch what I wanted out'r a man pretty quick," he said, standing before her; "'n I'll get it out'r you someways. Why ain't I t' come back?"

"Walt, you've not got no delicateness. O' course, *I* know it isn't Darlint—an' we bein' more o' a age; but what can I say——"

Walt folded his arms, and spoke with the drawl and the half-closed eyes that all Mindoorie hated.

"Tell 'em," he said blandly, "that me 'n Darlint's bin kipin' comp'ny, 'n we're thinkin' o' gittin' married soon."

The widow came very close and dropped her head on his shoulder.

"Oh, you funny boy," she murmured. "You've been keeping comp'ny with *me*."

Walt was not afraid of this woman any longer. She was just so much fire that must be beaten out before he won his way to Darlint.

"Yer tells it well, don't yer?" he said slowly. "Thinkin' I ain't bin seein' what yer was up ter all th' time, too! Ringin' 't on ter me wi' this 'n wi' that; 'n me all the time waitin' f'r Darlint, 'n t' know 'f I'd be crippled by th' burn. 'N laughin' at yer on th' sly. Ye're clever, ain't yer? 'N you jes' see here, Mary. I knowed yer f'r one o' the silly sort fr'm th' days when yer wore yer petticoats up t' yer knees. 'N a woman 't cared 'd never go makin' up t' a chap same's you done. So I ain't bothered t' say nuthin'. But I'm plunkin' f'r Darlint f'r all I'm wuth, 'n you got t' tell me where she is. 'R p'r'aps I'd best go 'n fin' her."

The widow was leaning against the wall, sobbing in long soft sobs. But she had followed every inflection of Walt's voice, and understood exactly. Darlint must marry Walt's money. And if Darlint did not wish, she would neither be broken nor bent. The sobs stopped, and she sprang for Walt in the doorway.

"I'll tell her, Walt. Walt—she's only a child. I'll tell her you want to marry her."

"Thanks," said Walt grimly. "I'd sooner tell her m'self, 'f it's all the same t' you."

He broke loose, and went out from the stuffy dark house to the hills. And the blowing wind and the yellowness of the tussock in sunshine flung his heart open in unruly gladness to give room to love, and boyish hope, and the stern desires of a man.

He was laughing with sheer excitement when he found her on the flat among the Maori graves;

and she nodded coldly, fighting still with a warped ricker.

"Mendin' up th' railin's, girlie? My land! That's a funny-lookin' splice. Here, Darlint. Lemme do't."

"Thank you. I'd rather do it myself."

He knelt on the warm grass beside her, putting his rough hands over hers.

"Let me. I like t' do things f'r yer, dearie. 'Tain't fit f'r them little hands, anyways."

"Don't!" she cried passionately. "How dare you speak to me—and touch me——"

She sprang up, straight as a young pine, and Walt sat back on his heels, staring dumbly. Quite suddenly there had come to her a strange dignity that seemed to put her far beyond him.

"I don't let the men I know speak to me like that. Please to remember."

Then she asked polite questions, and Walt answered dazedly; telling of the burn, with all the glory of the fight for her left out; digging in the dust of the unfenced graves with unfeeling, restless hands, and trying blindly to mine the cool, hard barrier of her words.

"Buildin' a house too," she said. "Then—then I s'pose you'll be thinking o' gettin' married." And she laughed.

Walt stood up swiftly, his breath coming short.

"I—I am thinkin' o't—Darlint——"

"Oh, I'm so glad," she said kindly. "It's quite time you did, of course. When a man comes to forty it's only right for him to settle down."

"I'm but thirty-four," said Walt, with a flash. Then his voice changed. "I mus' seem old t' young things like you. I was fergettin'. But I—am I too old f'r a young thing t' love, Darlint?"

His words were unsteady with pain, but she did not know. She was on guard against her own heartache, and that filled the earth, and more. Walt was to marry her mother. How dared he look at her like that? How dared he teach her to love him, and then—a blush caught and scorched her from head to foot, and she spoke wildly.

"Why, o' course not. I could love you quite nice as a father or a uncle. An' I dessay lots o' folk get married as old as you are. I only thought you was forty because you looked it. Crad Porter's twenty-two."

"Is he?" Walt rubbed his forehead stupidly, trying to rub the muddle of sky and hills into shape. "Darlint—I thought you knowed all this time—'n cared. You must hev knowed——"

There was dead silence, threaded on the far-off song of a lark. Walt's eyes cleared, and he saw Darlint running to the house down the hip-high track that the Maoris had trodden for blood and lust. He slouched after with his head low and the blown sand of the hills cutting his cheek.

"Curse that t'other chap," he said solemnly. "Curse him till th' end o' time. 'Cause o' him she flinched fr'm th' very touch o' my hand. I bin a fool—a blind fool. 'N I wish that green timber 'd gone wi' th' rest."

Walt overtook Darlint on the verandah.

"I'm goin'," he said levelly. "But I jes' wanted t' tell yer. There was never anyb'dy else f'r me——"

And then the widow came out. Her ferret eyes blinked from the man to the girl, and her thin lips narrowed and tightened. She had accepted the new order of things, and buckled her armour.

"Have you telled her, Walt? What does she say? Darlint, what are you lookin' that way for?"

Darlint glanced about helplessly, finding the door blocked. She dived for the side-path, and the widow fluttered after, sliding an arm round her.

"Go on, Darlint. Don't be shy. Walt——"

"You leave her 'lone," said Walt sharply. "'Tain't your bus'ness."

"What a-you been up to, Darlint? Messin' things up someways, I know. Look at me. What did you tell him?"

Darlint was shaking, and red and white by turns. She tried to free herself.

"I—told him as he was old enough to settle."

Walt laughed unmirthfully.

"'N I unnerstood. It's all right, Mary. Don't yer go meddlin'."

"Seems to me it's about time somebuddy meddled. Now, look here, Darlint. You'll do as I tell you, an' no more nonsense. I been jes' foolin' you about Walt. I ain't goin' to marry him, but you are. An' if you ain't said 'yes' yet, you'll say it now. D'you hear? Say it!"

"Mother——"

"Stop it," thundered Walt, scattering the gravel

of the path under hasty feet. "I won't hev that. You leave her be. I won't hev her forced."

"Did you tell him you wouldn't, Darlint?"

"She never! I never ast her, 'n I won't. 'Shut up, Mary. 'Tain't her fault; it's mine."

Darlint's dignity and courage had gone. She crouched by the gate in a limp heap, and wept hysterically. The widow glanced from one to the other, and longed to shake both. But she did not dare touch Walt. He stood, lean and lithe as an old grey wolf, and his half-shut eyes showed red.

"Don't you take no notice o' a silly gel's talk. I'll soon bring her round. Get up, Darlint! Cryin' there like a Maori fool——"

Darlint felt Walt's coat brush her as he came between. But he spoke only to her mother.

"That's 'nuff, Mary, 'n more. I ain't goin' t' force no girl 'gainst her will. 'F she can't love me she can't, 'n I—I ain't sech a brute 's that. 'N ye're not t' git on ter her. I ain't ast her, 'n I won't, so it's my blame. You let her marry that Porter chap 'f she wants ter. 'T's the young t' the young. My hoss 'll be rested 'nuff now, I reckon. Good-bye."

He did not trust himself to think or to wait. There would be time for that—years of time. He cast on the gear rapidly, and backed his horse out of the low stable that he had mended so often. There was a slip panel at end of the yard. It faced the Maori cemetery across the creek, and Walt had a mind to go out that way. He stooped to let down the rails, and the beat of quick feet came behind him. Slowly he straightened, and

looked at Darlint. Her face was like a wet rose, and her voice broke with laughter and tears.

"Come back," she said. "I want you. I've wanted you always. But I didn't know—oh, you are mean to leave all the asking for me to do!"

Walt held her off just one instant.

"Did—yer mother send yer?"

"Y-yes," said Darlint. "She sent me t-to take the pie out of the oven."

THE END

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